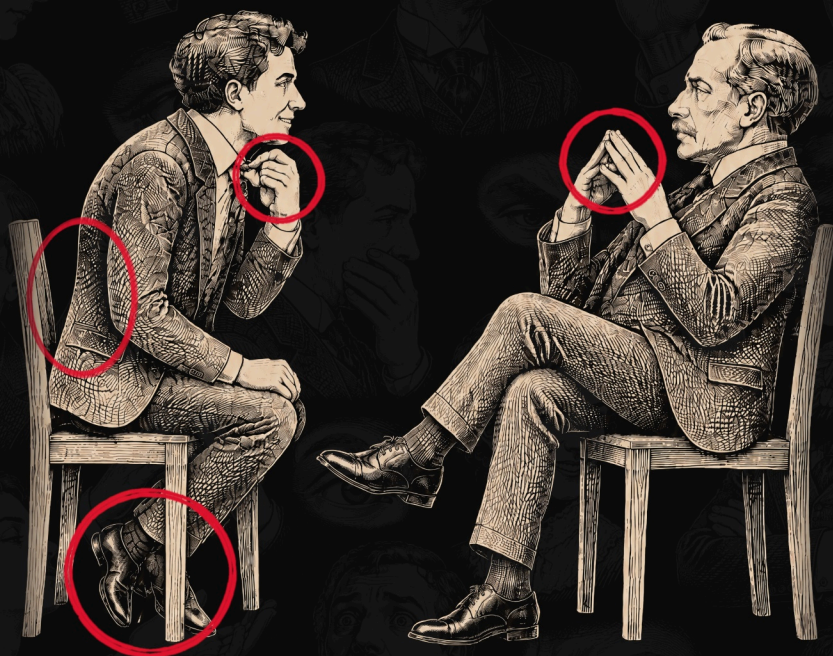


KONRAD VOSS



THE BODY DOESN'T LIE

READING BODY LANGUAGE

TO UNDERSTAND WHAT PEOPLE
REALLY THINK AND WHEN THEY LIE

DOMINA MENTIS

THE BODY DOESN'T LIE

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*How to Read Gestures, Faces, and Voices to Understand
What People Really Think and Spot When They're Lying*

KONRAD VOSS

DOMINA MENTIS

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Disclaimer. This book is for informational and educational purposes only. Reading body language does not allow you to know for certain what a person is thinking or whether they are lying: every signal must be read together with the others and in its context, and can never be used as proof against anyone. Unfair techniques are described so that readers can learn to recognize them and defend themselves. If you are in a situation of abuse, violence, or danger, you can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233, free and available around the clock; in immediate danger, call 911.

The names and people in the examples are fictional: any resemblance to real persons is coincidental. The studies and experiments cited are real and are listed in the bibliography at the end of the book.

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Four Rules Before You Judge

Saturday night, dinner at the in-laws'. Between courses, Paula works up the nerve and breaks the news: she and Matt have decided to move to Denver, because he's gotten a job offer he can't turn down. Her mother-in-law smiles right away. "Oh, what wonderful news, you two!" Then she picks up her napkin, folds it in half, folds it again, and squeezes it in her fist. Her father-in-law stops chewing for a second, drops his eyes to his plate, and leans back in his chair. Nobody says a word against it. Quite the opposite: out come the congratulations and a toast.

And yet, in the car on the way home, Paula says to Matt: "Your parents didn't take it well." He laughs. "They made a toast!" She couldn't tell you why she's so sure. She just feels it.

That feeling has a specific source. While the words were saying one thing, the bodies were saying another. And part of Paula was reading them without her even realizing it.

This book is here to turn that vague feeling into clear observation. To help you understand what caught your attention, give it the right weight, and above all, avoid drawing the wrong conclusions. Because that same feeling, taken as a certainty, can get you fighting with the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

Why the Body Speaks Before Words Do

Before you say a sentence, you have to think it through. You choose the words, decide on the tone, weigh the effect. It's slow, controlled

work, and that's why it can be tamed: you can be nice to people you don't like, you can say "Everything's fine" when nothing is.

The body, on the other hand, reacts first. Holding your breath, stiffening up, pulling back an inch or two: these are reactions that happen in a split second, before you've decided anything at all. The human body was reacting to danger and to pleasure long before language existed. Words came later, like an elegant suit worn over something much older.

This doesn't mean the body always tells "the truth" and words lie. It means the body tells you something else: how a person is experiencing that moment. Whether they're comfortable or uncomfortable. Whether they want to move closer or get away. Whether something has hit them. The body tells you the "how." It almost never tells you the "why."

Keep this difference in mind, because it's the key to the whole book. When Paula's mother-in-law squeezed her napkin, she wasn't saying "I'm against it." She was showing tension. It could have been sadness, fear of seeing her grandchildren less, worry about her son, even a stomachache that happened to hit at that very moment. Her body switched on a warning light. Figuring out what's behind the warning light is a different job.

The 93 Percent Myth

Before we go any further, let's get rid of a number you've probably heard a thousand times: "Communication is 93 percent nonverbal. Words account for only 7 percent, tone of voice for 38, and the body for 55."

These numbers come from the experiments of Albert Mehrabian, a psychologist at the University of California, collected in his book *Silent Messages* (1971). But Mehrabian was studying a very specific situation: people listened to single words, spoken in a tone that sometimes contradicted their meaning, and had to say whether the speaker felt liking or dislike. In that specific case, when words and tone contradict each

other and the subject is feelings, tone and face carry more weight than words.

Mehrabian himself has pointed out more than once that those proportions don't apply to communication in general. A little common sense makes it obvious: if words were worth 7 percent, you could watch a movie in Japanese and understand almost everything. That doesn't happen.

Mehrabian's real lesson is more useful than the myth: when words and body don't match, we tend to believe the body. And that's exactly where this book teaches you to look: in the mismatch.

What This Book Can Do, and What It Can't

Let's start with what it can't do. It isn't a lie detector. No book is.

In 2006, Charles Bond and Bella DePaulo pulled together the results of more than two hundred studies on people's ability to spot lies. On average, the people judging get it right about 54 percent of the time. Guessing at random would get you to 50. We're barely better than a coin toss. In Chapter 10 we'll see why, and what you can do better.

So be wary of anyone who promises you'll "read anyone like an open book" or "catch every lie in an instant." There's no such thing as the "lie gesture." There's no signal that always means the same thing for everyone. Whoever sells you that is selling you false certainty, and false certainty is worse than doubt, because it makes you confidently wrong.

Here's what this book can do, if you use it well:

1. Help you notice what used to slip past you: a shift in posture, a pause, a foot that turns toward the door.
2. Help you tell when someone is uncomfortable with a specific topic, so you know where to ask one more question.
3. Help you recognize people who use their body to pressure you, intimidate you, or win trust they don't deserve.

4. Make you aware of your own signals, so people listen to you more and you don't give away what you'd rather keep to yourself.
5. Teach you a valuable habit: observe before you judge.

That's no small thing. It's the difference between being swept away by your impressions and using them as clues to be checked.

The Four Rules

The whole book rests on four rules. You'll find them in every chapter, applied to feet, hands, face, voice, and distance. Learn them now, because without them every signal you study becomes a weapon pointed in the wrong direction.

Rule 1. The Baseline

Everyone has their own normal way of being in the world. Some people gesture all the time, some stay perfectly still, some talk fast, some make little eye contact, some touch their hair every couple of minutes. This habitual behavior is called the baseline. It's your yardstick: a signal only counts if it departs from it.

Here's an example. Luke, the coworker at the next desk, bounces his leg under the table all day long, from the moment he gets in until he leaves. If you see it bouncing while the boss asks him about the late project, you haven't discovered anything: that's just Luke. But if one day, during that same question, his leg suddenly stops and stays still, then yes, something has happened.

We devote all of Chapter 2 to this, because it's the rule almost everyone skips.

Rule 2. Clusters, Never a Single Signal

A single signal means almost nothing. A cluster of signals pointing the same way starts to say something.

In a meeting, Rita has her arms crossed. On their own, crossed arms mean nothing: maybe she's comfortable that way, maybe she's cold. But if at the same time her lips are pressed tight, her torso is turned toward the window, she answers in monosyllables, and she stops taking notes, then the signals add up. It isn't proof. It's a stronger hypothesis.

Think of signals as witnesses. A single witness can be wrong. Four witnesses telling the same story, each in their own way, deserve your attention.

Rule 3. Context

The same gesture changes meaning depending on where you are, who you're with, what time it is, how warm or cold it is, and why you're there.

Crossed arms in a clinic waiting room in February, with the door opening onto the parking lot every three minutes: probably cold. A job candidate rubbing their hands together before an interview: probably the normal jitters of someone with a job on the line, not the sign of some dark secret. A man who keeps checking his watch during a business lunch: maybe he's bored, maybe he has to pick up his daughter from school at three.

Before you interpret, always ask yourself: is there a simple explanation for this gesture? Often there is.

Rule 4. Changes Matter More Than Positions

A position says little. A change, especially one that comes at a specific moment, says much more.

David is at a dealership, shopping for a used car. For twenty minutes the salesman is loose and easygoing: he smiles, leans on the counter, jokes about last night's game. Then David asks: "And the 60,000-mile service, was that done?" The salesman stops moving, straightens up, picks up a sheet of paper from the desk, and squares it up for no reason. What matters isn't the upright posture itself. It's that his posture changed right after that question.

When you see a change, connect it to what just happened: a question, a name, a topic, someone walking in. The timing is the most valuable piece of information you have.

When the Four Rules Point the Same Way

If you know a person's baseline, you see a cluster of signals, the context offers no simple explanation, and everything changes right after a specific moment, then you're holding something serious.

What do you have, exactly? A hypothesis. Not a verdict. The hypothesis tells you where to look, what question to ask, what to dig into. Maybe David's salesman is hiding something about the service. Or maybe he just doesn't know the answer and is afraid of looking bad. The right move isn't to accuse him: it's to ask for the service records. The body has pointed you to the door. Opening it is up to you, with the right questions.

How to Use This Book

The book is built as a path. The first two chapters give you the foundations: how the brain reacts to a threat, and how to observe a person before you judge them. Then we work our way up from the ground: feet and legs, torso and shoulders, arms and hands, face, eyes, voice, distance. Every part of the body has its own signals and its own traps.

With these tools in hand, you reach the more delicate chapters: lies, interest and attraction, work. Then we turn the mirror toward you, so you can understand how your body talks to other people. The last chapter teaches you to recognize people who use the body as a weapon. At the back, you'll find a quick reference of one hundred signals to check on the fly and a thirty-day program to train your eye.

A few practical tips:

1. **One chapter at a time.** Don't devour the book in one evening. Read a chapter, then let a few days go by.

2. **Do the exercises.** Every chapter has one, designed for everyday life: the coffee shop, the office, the line at the post office. Reading without practicing is like learning to swim from the couch.
3. **Observe discreetly.** Nobody likes feeling studied. Look naturally, without staring, and keep your hypotheses to yourself.
4. **Start with the people you know.** You already have a baseline for them, even if you've never called it that. They're the best training ground there is.
5. **Write it down.** A notebook or the notes app on your phone. What you saw, when, what had just happened. In a few weeks, you'll notice things that used to pass right in front of you without leaving a trace.

A Promise Before We Begin

Reading the body gives you a real advantage. And like any advantage, it can be used well or badly.

This book asks you to use it to understand and to protect yourself. To notice when a friend is struggling even though they say "I'm fine." To spot a salesperson's pressure before you sign. To sense when a meeting is taking a bad turn. To get people to listen to you without putting on an act.

Not to pass judgment. Not to call someone a liar because they touched their nose. People are more complicated than any gesture, and good observers know that better than anyone.

Remember Paula, in the car on the way home from dinner. Her feeling was right: something hadn't gone well. But the smart move wasn't saying "Your parents are against it." It was calling her mother-in-law the next day and asking her: "How do you really feel about this whole Denver thing?" And listening to the answer.

Observe, form a hypothesis, check it with respect. That's all there is to it. Let's begin.

The Brain That Can't Lie

A condo association meeting on a Tuesday evening, in the community room on the ground floor. Twenty or so plastic chairs, the smell of coffee from the machine, somebody checking their phone. The property manager leafs through his papers and gets to the item everyone has been waiting for: "For the exterior repairs, the special assessment comes to about \$8,000 per unit."

Claire, from the third floor, isn't looking at the property manager. She's watching her neighbors. And in those three seconds of silence, she sees three different things.

Mr. Ferris, a retiree from the first floor, freezes. He doesn't breathe, doesn't move, and holds his pen suspended over the page as if someone had hit the pause button. Mrs. Martin, next to him, pushes her chair back a few inches and leans back in her seat, away from the table. Young Brandon, from the top floor, sits up straight, stiffens his shoulders, and crosses his arms hard. Then, almost at the same moment, Mrs. Martin brings a hand to the base of her neck and keeps it there.

Nobody has said a word yet. But Claire already knows how the evening is going to go: Mr. Ferris will try not to be noticed, Mrs. Martin will try to put it off, and Brandon will go on the attack.

She has just watched, live, the three oldest reactions of the human body. And the first attempt to calm down. This chapter will teach you to see them too.

A Part of the Brain That Reacts Before You Do

Joe Navarro spent twenty-five years at the FBI working in counterintelligence and interrogation. In his book *What Every BODY Is Saying* (2008), he puts forward a simple idea: inside each of us there's a part of the brain that reacts to the world quickly, automatically, and with very little filtering. Navarro calls it the "limbic system," as popular science often does. We can call it the emotional brain.

The emotional brain has an ancient job: keeping us alive. It assesses in a flash whether what's happening around us is a threat or an opportunity, and it gets the body ready to respond. It doesn't wait for you to think it over. By the time you think about it, your body has already reacted.

Alongside it is the brain that reasons, plans, and chooses words. That's the part that lets you say "What a great idea" when you think the idea is terrible. That's the part that can lie. The emotional brain, on the other hand, is a very bad liar. Its reactions come too fast to be fully controlled.

An honest caveat. The term "limbic system" dates back to the 1950s, and today many neuroscientists consider it a simplification: emotions involve many areas of the brain working together, not a single drawer cut off from the rest. For this book, the practical picture is enough, and it's still useful: there are fast, automatic reactions, and there are slow, controlled choices. The body mostly shows the first kind.

That's why people say "the body doesn't lie." Not because every gesture is sincere. But because certain reactions fire before a person has time to decide how to come across.

The Three Ancient Reactions: Freeze, Flight, Fight

In 1915, the American physiologist Walter Cannon described what he called the "fight-or-flight" response: faced with danger, the body gets ready to fight or to run. The heart speeds up, the muscles gear up, breathing changes.

Navarro adds a step that comes before the other two: the freeze. Picture a rabbit in a meadow. If it sees a shadow, the first thing it does isn't run. It goes still. Many predators notice movement more than shape, so staying still is the first line of defense. Only if stillness isn't enough does the rabbit run. And only if it's cornered does it fight.

So the order is freeze, flight, fight. And it holds for us too.

In humans, freezing isn't just a figure of speech. In a 2010 study, Karin Roelofs, Muriel Hagenars, and John Stins had people stand on a platform that measures even the slightest sway of the body. While they stood there, angry, neutral, or happy faces appeared on a screen in front of them. When they saw the angry faces, their bodies swayed less and their heart rate slowed: a small human version of the rabbit's stillness, which the participants hadn't chosen and often didn't even notice.

Nobody chases us across the savanna anymore. But the emotional brain runs the same program for very different threats: an angry boss, an embarrassing question, an unexpected number, an accusation at the dinner table. And the modern body still shows all three reactions, just in a polite version.

The Freeze in Everyday Life

The modern freeze is subtle. We don't turn into statues, but we come close.

The most common signal is a held breath. A person is talking, hears something that puts them on alert, and stops breathing for a moment. Sometimes you can see it, because the chest stops moving; sometimes you can hear it: the next sentence comes out with a little sigh, as if the air had been stuck.

Then there's movement that stops. Someone who was gesturing stops. Someone who was playing with a pen puts it down. Someone who was rocking in their chair goes still. In practice, the body is trying not to draw attention.

A third signal is “making yourself small.” The shoulders rise a little, the head drops, the body takes up less space. It’s what students do when the teacher runs down the roster to pick someone to call on. It’s what employees do when the director walks into the open-plan office and asks: “Who sent that email to the client?”

Finally, you can hear the freeze in conversation too. The person talks less, gives one-word answers, stalls for time. “Uh... yeah... I mean...” It isn’t necessarily evasiveness: it’s the brain pulling the emergency brake.

One thing needs saying right away, and we’ll say it often: freezing doesn’t mean someone is guilty. It means they feel exposed. Mr. Ferris at the meeting wasn’t hiding anything: he felt threatened by an expense he may not be able to afford. People who are wrongly accused freeze too. In fact, they often freeze more than someone who really is guilty and came prepared.

Flight Without Running

Nobody gets up and runs out of a meeting. But the body finds a thousand ways to get away without leaving the chair.

The simplest is creating distance: leaning back, moving your chair, taking a step back when you’re talking on your feet. Mrs. Martin did exactly that at the meeting.

Then there are barriers. When we can’t move away, we put something in between: a bag on our lap, a mug held in both hands in front of the chest, a phone that suddenly becomes fascinating. It’s a symbolic escape: “I can’t leave, but I can protect myself.”

The eyes run away too. Closing them a beat longer, covering them with a hand, looking elsewhere: ways of not seeing what bothers us. We’ll take our time with this in the chapter on the eyes.

And finally there’s the declared escape, the kind dressed up as a prior commitment: checking your watch, saying “Excuse me, I have to make a call,” suddenly remembering an appointment. The excuse isn’t nec-

essarily false. But if it comes right after a particular topic, the timing is interesting.

In the coming chapters, we'll go through the body zone by zone and see how it pulls away: feet that turn, a torso that rotates, arms that withdraw. For now, the general idea is enough. When we don't like something, the body tries to put space between us and that thing.

Fight Without Fists

If freezing and pulling away don't work, there's one card left to play: confrontation. Fortunately, in modern life the fight is almost always hands-off.

A body getting ready for a clash stiffens. The shoulders square up, the chin lifts or juts down and forward, the jaw clenches. Breathing gets faster and louder. The voice gets louder or, on the contrary, drops low and sharp.

You see it at the sports bar when the argument over Sunday's bad call goes from joking to personal. You see it in the school parents' group chat when someone starts typing in all caps. You see it on the road, when a driver gets out of the car to argue about who had the right of way.

The modern fight is waged mostly with words: sarcasm, digs, interruptions, aggressive questions. "Oh, really? And what about you?" It's still the same reaction as the cornered rabbit. Except that instead of teeth, we use tone.

A useful detail: people who go on the attack often do so after trying the other two routes. Young Brandon at the meeting didn't have the patience to freeze. But many people, before they raise their voice, have already held their breath and looked for a way out. When there's no way out, they explode. If you learn to recognize the first two steps, you can often head off the third by giving the other person a way out before they feel cornered.

Comfort and Discomfort: The Key to the Whole Book

Now we come to the most important idea in this chapter, the one you'll use on every page that follows.

Navarro argues that the right question to ask when you look at a body isn't "Are they lying?" It's "Are they feeling good or bad, right now?" In other words: comfort or discomfort.

When a person is comfortable, the body opens up, loosens, and moves closer to what it likes. Movements are fluid, breathing is steady, the voice is soft. When a person is uncomfortable, the body closes up, stiffens, and pulls away. Freezing, fleeing, and fighting are all responses to discomfort.

Why does this key work better than hunting for lies? For three reasons.

1. Discomfort is actually visible. A lie has no specific signal; discomfort has many.
2. Discomfort tells you where to look. If it shows up after a certain question, that question touches something.
3. Discomfort is honest about the fact that you don't know the reason. It forces you to ask yourself "Why?" instead of taking the answer for granted.

And there are plenty of possible reasons. A person may be uncomfortable because they're lying. But also because they're afraid of not being believed, because the topic reminds them of something painful, because they're tired, because their shoes hurt, because they're thinking about a kid at home with a fever. The body tells you that something weighs on them. It doesn't tell you what.

This is where the four rules from the introduction come back. Discomfort has to be compared with that person's baseline. It has to be looked for in clusters of signals, not in a single gesture. It has to be read in context. And it has to be tied to the moment something changed. Comfort and discomfort are the compass. The four rules are the map.

Pacifying Behaviors

There's one last family of signals that comes from the emotional brain, and it may be the easiest to see. After a scare, a bout of tension, a difficult moment, the body tries to calm itself down. It does this through touch.

In a 1969 study, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen called these gestures aimed at one's own body "adaptors": touching, scratching, rubbing. Navarro calls them pacifying behaviors, small self-soothing gestures, or simply pacifiers. That's the name we'll use, because it tells you right away what they do: they help the body give itself some relief.

The principle is ancient. A frightened child sucks their thumb or clutches a security blanket. As adults we have more discreet versions, but the mechanism is the same: a reassuring touch we give ourselves to bring the tension down.

Here are the most common ones:

1. **Touching the neck.** Rubbing the back of the neck, covering the hollow at the base of the throat with a hand, playing with a necklace. Navarro considers it one of the most reliable signals of discomfort, because the neck is a vulnerable area.
2. **Rubbing the hands.** Slowly, one against the other, or lacing the fingers together and squeezing. This is different from the quick rubbing of someone who's cold or who's looking forward to something.
3. **Touching the face.** Rubbing the forehead, stroking the cheeks, touching the lips, tugging on an earlobe.
4. **Exhaling with puffed cheeks.** A long breath out, as if to empty yourself. It's what people do right after getting through a tough moment.
5. **Stroking the hair.** Running a hand through the hair, twirling a strand, smoothing the hair at the back of the neck.
6. **Adjusting clothes.** Loosening a shirt collar, straightening a tie, pulling the sleeves down over the hands.

7. **Yawning at odd moments.** Under stress, people sometimes yawn without being tired. The body is trying to regulate itself.

Here's what to remember: pacifying behaviors come after. First something unsettles us, then the body tries to calm down. So the gesture itself tells you little. What you want to know is what happened a moment before.

If Mrs. Martin touches her neck right after the \$8,000 figure, the connection is obvious. If she touches her neck all through the meeting, from the reading of the minutes to setting the date of the next one, it's probably a habit of hers, or maybe she just has a stiff neck. Baseline, always.

And one more thing: pacifying behaviors are a useful signal, not evidence against someone. They tell you the person is trying to manage tension. They aren't a confession of guilt: they're a human being trying to keep their courage up.

Now let's see how all these reactions show up one after another, within two minutes, in an ordinary kitchen.

IN PRACTICE

The Scratch on the Car

Sunday morning, Sam goes down to the garage and finds a long scratch along the side of his car. Last night his son Ethan, who's sixteen, borrowed it to go over to a friend's house.

Sam heads back inside and finds Ethan in the kitchen, staring at his phone over a bowl of cereal. He sits down across from him, without raising his voice. "Ethan, how did it go with the car last night?"

Ethan freezes. The spoon stops halfway to his mouth, his thumb goes still on the screen. For a second he doesn't breathe. Then he answers, quietly: "Fine... why?"

Sam notes the first reaction: freeze. But he doesn't jump to conclusions. He asks an open-ended question: "Tell me about the ride. Where did you go?"

Ethan leans back in his chair, turns his gaze toward the window, picks up his phone and holds it in front of his chest. "Freddie's, I told you. Then I came home." Second reaction: flight. Distance, a barrier, eyes that escape. A short answer.

So Sam says: "There's a scratch on the car that wasn't there on Friday."

Ethan's voice suddenly shoots up: "Here we go, it's always me! Maybe somebody did it in the garage! Why do you always have to think it's my fault?" Stiff shoulders, clenched jaw. Third reaction: fight. Right after that, he slowly rubs the back of his neck and blows out a breath through puffed cheeks. Pacifying behaviors.

At this point, an angry father would say: "See? You just gave yourself away." Sam, instead, thinks it through with the four rules. Ethan is usually chatty and relaxed at breakfast, so the change is real. There are many signals, and they're consistent. And the discomfort showed up right with the question about the car.

But Sam also knows what the body can't tell him. Ethan's discomfort may come from the fact that he scratched the car. Or from the fear of

being blamed, since that's exactly what happened last time. Or from the fact that last night he wasn't at Freddie's but at a girl's place, and the scratch has nothing to do with it.

So Sam lowers the tension. "I'm not mad about the scratch. I want to know if you got hurt and what happened." Ethan breathes, and his shoulders drop. After a minute he tells him: a tight squeeze in a parking garage, the side of the car scraping a concrete pillar, and being too scared to say so.

Ethan's body had flagged that something was wrong. Sam's calm is what let them pop the hood and see what was underneath.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake is confusing discomfort with guilt.

It goes like this: you see someone freeze, pull away, touch their neck, and you immediately think, "They're hiding something." That's a huge leap. You've seen that this person feels bad at that moment. You haven't seen why.

Think of how many times you've felt uncomfortable without having done anything wrong. When a police officer pulls you over at a traffic stop, even though your license and registration are in order. When your boss calls you in with a "Got a minute?" and doesn't say why. When someone at dinner brings up a subject that hurts you. In those moments, your body was showing the same signals as a guilty person's.

The same goes for other people. People who are shy, who've been wrongly accused in the past, who are afraid of authority, or who simply worry about not being believed: they all show discomfort when faced with a sensitive question. And the harder you push them, the more the discomfort grows. So you end up seeing confirmation where there's only a person under pressure.

How do you avoid this mistake? With one sentence to keep in your pocket at all times: “Discomfort is a question, not an answer.” When you see it, don’t ask yourself “What are they hiding?” Ask yourself “What exactly made them uncomfortable, and at what moment?” Then check calmly, the way Sam did. Lowering the tension is often the fastest way to get to the truth, because a person who feels cornered thinks about defending themselves, not about telling you what happened.

And if you notice that you’re the one who freezes, flees, or goes on the attack when you’re under pressure, know that you can learn to manage that reaction: we cover it in the companion book, *Emotional Control*.

EXERCISE

The three-reactions journal. For seven days, train your eye to recognize freeze, flight, fight, and pacifying behaviors in real life.

1. **Set up your notebook.** On one page, draw four columns: Freeze, Flight, Fight, Pacifying. A note on your phone works too.
2. **Pick one hour a day.** It could be a coffee break, family dinner, the morning meeting, or even a political talk show on TV, which is a gold mine of reactions under pressure.
3. **Look for the moment of tension.** A tough question, unexpected news, a criticism, a number. As soon as it comes, watch the bodies of the people in the room, not the face of whoever is speaking.
4. **Write down who and what.** One line per signal: who it was, what their body did, which column you put it in. Example: "Mark, held breath and pen stopped: freeze."
5. **Write down the trigger.** Next to each signal, note the sentence or event that came a second before ("the boss asked who's working Saturday"). This is the most important part of the exercise, because it connects the body to the context.
6. **Don't stop at your first hypothesis.** Ask yourself what might have caused the discomfort. Write down at least two different explanations, one of them innocent.
7. **At the end of the week, read it back.** Which reactions did you see most often? In which situations? How many times was the innocent explanation the most likely one?

Bonus: for one day, turn your attention to yourself. When you feel tension, notice what your body does before you decide anything. It's the fastest way to understand how automatic these reactions are.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The body reacts before words do: the fast reactions of the emotional brain are hard to control completely.
- Faced with a threat, the body follows an ancient order: freeze, flight, fight. Today it does so in a polite version.
- The right question isn't "Are they lying?" but "Are they comfortable or uncomfortable, right now?"
- Pacifying behaviors come after tension: what matters is what happened a moment before.
- Discomfort is a question, not an answer: it tells you where to look, not what to think.
- Lowering the tension brings out the truth faster than putting a person under pressure.

The Baseline

Julia is thirty-two and has been working at a communications agency for three weeks. Her new manager is Carl, a man in his fifties whose manner throws her completely. He never smiles. When she pitches him an idea, he listens with his arms crossed and his face perfectly still, and at the end all he says is: “Okay. Send it over.”

Every evening Julia comes home and tells her partner the same thing: “He doesn’t like me. You can tell from the way he looks at me.” She has already started browsing job listings.

Then one Friday, by the coffee machine, an older coworker fills her in: “Carl? He’s like that with everyone. Even with the owner. When something bothers him, he doesn’t keep quiet: he tells you to your face, and loudly.” And she adds: “By the way, in yesterday’s meeting he said you’re the best hire we’ve made in years.”

Julia did what all of us do. She read Carl’s signals using herself, and the people she knows, as the yardstick. To her, crossed arms and a serious face mean disapproval. To Carl, they mean “I’m listening.” She was missing one piece of information: what Carl is usually like.

That piece of information has a name. It’s called the baseline.

What the Baseline Is

The baseline is how a person normally behaves when nothing in particular is bothering them. How they sit, how much they gesture, how much eye contact they make, how fast they talk, which little habits

they keep repeating. It's their "zero," like the tare on a scale: the starting point you measure everything else against.

Without a baseline, every signal is silent. Someone who touches their nose, jiggles a leg, or looks down tells you nothing until you know whether they always do it, or whether they're doing it now, for the first time, right after a particular question.

Think of a doctor taking your blood pressure. A reading of 140 is high for a twenty-year-old who has never had any problems. For a seventy-year-old who has been at that level for years, it may be nothing new. Same number. The meaning changes depending on what came before.

The body works the same way. Everyone has their own starting pressure. What you're looking for are the changes.

This means you can't read a baseline in a book. No chapter can tell you what your coworker, your mother-in-law, or the supplier you've dealt with for years is like. You can only find out by watching them. The book tells you what to watch and how. The rest is up to you, and it's the most important work in this whole journey.

Why First Impressions Get It Wrong

If the baseline matters so much, why does almost nobody use it? Because our brain is in a hurry. It sizes people up in an instant, and then it defends that judgment.

A Tenth of a Second

In 2006, Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov of Princeton University showed a group of people photographs of unfamiliar faces for very brief moments: a tenth of a second, half a second, one second. Then they asked them to judge those faces: how trustworthy, competent, likable, or aggressive does this person seem?

The result was striking. Judgments made after a tenth of a second were already very close to those made by other participants who could look at the photos for as long as they liked. More time didn't change the

opinion much. Mostly, it increased the confidence with which people held it.

Be careful how you read this study. It doesn't say first impressions are right. It says they're fast and they tend to stick. Those are two different things. Todorov himself, in his book *Face Value* (2017), brought together a large body of research showing how often the impressions we form from a face, however widely shared, turn out to be wrong. We all agree, and we're all mistaken.

Thin Slices

In 1993, Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal ran an experiment that became famous. They filmed several college instructors while they taught, then edited short silent clips: thirty seconds, and then even shorter versions. People who had never seen those instructors watched the clips and rated them: does this person seem confident, warm, attentive, enthusiastic?

Those ratings, made in a few moments and without sound, came remarkably close to the evaluations students gave the same instructors at the end of the semester, after months of classes. Ambady and Rosenthal called these small samples of behavior "thin slices."

At first glance, this looks like proof that first impressions work. And in part it's true: for some general things, like a person's style, their warmth, their energy, a few seconds are enough to form an idea that often holds up. But notice what they were measuring: an overall impression of how someone comes across. Not what they're thinking at a specific moment, not whether they're being honest about something specific, not why they're nervous today.

Thin slices tell you something about a person's style. To understand what's going on inside them at a given moment, you need to compare it with their normal.

Character or Situation?

There's another reason first impressions go wrong. In 1967, Edward Jones and Victor Harris had some students read essays either for or against Fidel Castro. Some readers were told the writer had chosen the position freely. The others were told the position had been assigned, drawn by lot.

Even when they knew the position had been assigned, readers still thought that whoever had written in favor of Castro must be somewhat pro-Castro. They tended to explain what they read through the person and ignored the situation. In 1977, the psychologist Lee Ross gave this tendency a name: "the fundamental attribution error."

Applied to the body, the error works like this. You see a job candidate sweating and wringing their hands in an interview and you think, "They're insecure." But they're in a situation that would make anyone tense. Or you see someone who is always serious and you think, "They're unfriendly," when that's simply how they are in the world. Without a baseline, you pin on character what depends on the moment, and on the moment what depends on character.

In short, the brain is wired to make fast guesses. The only real antidote to that rush is to stop and observe what's normal.

How to Build a Baseline

The good news is that building a baseline doesn't require special tools. It requires time, attention, and a bit of method.

How Much Time It Takes

There's no magic number. But there are a few practical guidelines.

In a single conversation, the first few minutes of small talk are the best moment. You talk about traffic, the weather, where you parked. Nobody is under pressure, so the body shows its normal state. Those minutes are gold: they're your starting snapshot.

With people you see often, the baseline becomes more reliable over time. After a few encounters you know how that person behaves when they're relaxed, when they're tired, when they're in a hurry. And you can recognize the exceptions.

One important point: there isn't just one baseline. The same person behaves one way at happy hour with friends and another way in a meeting with the director. If you want to understand how they react in meetings, compare them with other meetings, not with happy hour. Compare similar situations with each other.

Neutral Questions

The simplest way to build a baseline in a conversation is to ask easy questions, the elevator or waiting-room kind. "Did you find parking okay?" "How was traffic this morning?" "How are you getting along with the new software?"

While the other person answers, notice how they tell a story that's true and low-stakes. How much they gesture. Where they look while they remember. The rhythm of their voice. How they hold their hands. That's how they talk when nothing is at stake.

Later, when the important question comes, you'll have something to compare it with. If the answer comes with the same rhythm and the same ease, fine. If something changes, you'll notice.

What to Watch

You don't need to watch everything. In fact, if you try to watch everything, you end up seeing nothing. Pick a few elements and keep an eye on them:

1. **Resting posture.** How they sit or stand when nothing is happening: leaning back or forward, open or closed.
2. **How much they gesture.** A lot, a little, not at all? Do they use their hands to explain?
3. **Repeated habits.** Touching their hair, playing with a ring, bouncing a foot, adjusting their glasses.

4. **Gaze.** How much eye contact they make, where they look when they're thinking.
5. **Voice.** Volume, speed, pauses. Do they talk in a rush or take their time?
6. **Response time.** Do they answer right away or think for a moment, even with simple questions?
7. **Distance.** How close they get when they talk, whether they touch other people.

Three or four are enough to start. With practice, they'll become automatic.

Different People, Different Baselines

Everyone has their own baseline, and some differences are so common that it pays to know them in advance, so you don't mistake them for signals.

Shy and High-Strung People

Shy people make little eye contact, speak softly, move very little, keep to themselves. They aren't hiding anything: that's how they're made. If you judge a shy person by an extrovert's yardstick, they'll always look uncomfortable and always look "suspicious."

Then there are people who are high-strung by nature. They jiggle a leg, drum their fingers, touch their face, shift position every minute. For them, all of this is normal. With them, the interesting signal is often the opposite: when they go still. A fidgety person who suddenly freezes is telling you more than a calm person who starts to fidget.

There are also people who, because of who they are, make little eye contact, speak in a flat tone, or repeat certain movements. It isn't your job to diagnose them or label them. It is your job to remember that their normal isn't yours.

The Body, Health, and the Day

Someone with a bad back changes position often. Someone who is hard of hearing leans forward and watches your lips. Someone who has had three coffees is more restless. Someone who slept four hours is slower. Someone who is cold hunches up. Someone in new shoes rocks on their feet.

These sound like trivial details, but they're the number one cause of misreadings. Before you look for psychological explanations, look for physical ones.

Cultures and Regions

The way we move is also learned from the environment we grow up in. In the 1930s, the anthropologist David Efron studied the gestures of Italian immigrants and Eastern European Jewish immigrants in New York. He published his findings in 1941. The two communities gestured in very different ways. But their children, raised in American surroundings, largely lost their parents' gestures and picked up those of their classmates. The way we gesture, in other words, isn't in our blood: it's learned.

You can see the same thing within a single country. Someone from a lively neighborhood in Brooklyn and someone from a quiet town in rural Minnesota telling the same story will often use very different amounts of gesturing. Even in Europe, someone from Naples in southern Italy and someone from Milan in the north will move very differently. Both may be perfectly calm. A stereotype isn't a rule, and every region has every kind of person. But gestures, voice volume, and distance change from family to family, from region to region, from country to country. The more the person in front of you comes from a different background than yours, the more you need the baseline.

Observing Without Being Noticed

Building a baseline doesn't mean planting yourself in front of someone and staring. People notice when they're being studied, and they

change their behavior. Worse, they feel uncomfortable, and you end up measuring the discomfort you created.

A few practical rules.

Use your peripheral vision. You can look at the person's face while they talk, as you would anyway, and notice their hands and shoulders out of the corner of your eye. With a bit of practice, you'll see far more than you think.

Take advantage of natural moments. While you stir your coffee, while you flip through the menu, while you look for something in your bag. These are moments when glancing around is normal.

Don't take notes in front of anyone. If you want to remember something, write it down later.

Act naturally. If your body is stiff and your face is tight with concentration, you broadcast tension. The other person picks up on it and tenses up too. The best observation comes from someone who simply looks interested in the conversation.

Don't turn it into surveillance. Observing is about understanding who you're dealing with, not about building a police file. What you notice remains your own hypothesis, to be checked with respect.

Let's see what happens when these rules leave the theory and walk into a real negotiation.

IN PRACTICE

The Penalty Clause

Alexis is the purchasing manager at a small furniture maker outside the city. For a few months she has been negotiating with Frank, who owns a company that supplies wood panels. Their first meeting left her puzzled. Frank talked loud and fast, tapped his pen on the table nonstop, and got up mid-sentence to point at something in the sample book. Alexis thought: "This guy is agitated. Something's wrong."

But Alexis knows the baseline rule, and she didn't trust her first impression. At the second meeting, she watched more carefully. Frank tapped his pen while talking about his vacation in Florida and while talking about his daughter's graduation. He raised his voice about prices and about football in exactly the same way. He got up from his chair even to grab a glass of water. That was simply how he was. Not agitated: lively.

By the third meeting, Alexis has a clear picture of the normal Frank. And then comes the delicate moment. "Frank, for this order we'd like to add a penalty clause for late deliveries. Two percent per week."

Frank stops tapping his pen. He sets it down on the table, lined up with the edge of the page. He leans back in his chair. His voice, which usually fills the room, drops. "Well, we could look at it... it depends." A short, slow answer, nothing like him.

If Alexis hadn't known his baseline, she would have seen a man who had finally calmed down. Instead, she sees a man who, for the first time in three meetings, has stopped moving. A sharp change, right after one specific word: "penalty." And not just one: pen down, leaning back, lower voice, short answer. A cluster of signals.

Alexis doesn't know why yet. Maybe Frank has had delivery problems with other clients. Maybe his lumber supplier is running late. Maybe the penalty just seems unfair to him. She doesn't accuse him and doesn't push on the number. She asks an open question: "How have deliveries gone this year, with the raw materials?"

Frank sighs, rubs the back of his neck, and after a few seconds he tells her: his main supplier in Canada has had problems, and since March it has been delivering two or three weeks late. Now Alexis knows what she really needs to negotiate: not the penalty, but the dates.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake is using yourself as the baseline.

It goes like this: “When I’m on edge, I touch my face, so if he’s touching his face, he’s tense.” Or: “I always look people in the eye when they talk to me, so if she’s not looking at me, she’s hiding something.” That’s exactly what Julia did with Carl. It’s what almost all of us do, almost all the time, without realizing it.

The problem is that everyone has a different repertoire. The way you show nerves isn’t the way other people do. Your normal level of gesturing, eye contact, and voice isn’t anyone else’s level. If you measure others with your own yardstick, you’ll see signals where there are only differences.

There’s a variation of the same mistake: judging after a single encounter, in a special situation. A first date, a job interview, dinner with your partner’s parents, the first meeting with a client. These are all moments when people aren’t at their normal. If you build the baseline on that moment, you’re measuring the tension, not the person.

How do you avoid it? With two habits. First: when you see a signal, ask yourself “Do they always do that?” before you ask “What does it mean?” Second: wait for the second or third encounter before you judge someone’s character. Your first impression will still fire in a tenth of a second. You can’t switch it off, but you can decide to put it on hold.

EXERCISE

Three people, three profiles. For one week, build the baseline of three people you see often.

1. **Choose the three people.** One from work or school, one from your family, and one you only see in passing (the barista, a coworker from another department, the neighbor you run into in the elevator). People who are different from one another.
2. **Prepare three profiles.** On each one, write the name and seven headings: resting posture, how much they gesture, repeated habits, gaze, voice, response time, distance.
3. **First round of observation.** In the first two or three days, at a calm moment, fill in the profiles. A word or a phrase per heading is enough. "Gestures: lots, with both hands." "Habits: always adjusts glasses."
4. **Second round, in a different situation.** In the last few days, watch the same people at a different moment: in a more formal setting, when they're tired, or when they're in a hurry. Note what changes compared with the first profile.
5. **Look for a change.** If, in either round, you saw a moment when something departed from that person's normal, write it down: what changed, when, and what had just happened.
6. **Compare with yourself.** At the end, fill in a profile on yourself too, with the help of someone who knows you well if you're up for it. Then put the four profiles side by side and see how different they are. It's the best proof that your yardstick doesn't fit anyone else.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The baseline is how a person normally behaves: it's the yardstick for measuring every signal.
- First impressions form in a tenth of a second and are hard to change, but fast doesn't mean right.
- Thin slices capture a person's style, not what's going on inside them at a specific moment.
- Build the baseline in calm moments, with neutral questions, and compare similar situations.
- Shyness, a high-strung temperament, health, fatigue, culture, and region all change what's normal for each person.
- The most common mistake is using your own behavior as the yardstick: always ask yourself "Do they always do that?" before "What does it mean?"

Feet and Legs

Friday night, a cocktail bar downtown. Eleanor, thirty-six, is on a first date with Nick, whom she met at a party thrown by mutual friends. They're standing by the bar, drinks in hand. Nick smiles, nods, laughs at her jokes. He asks about her job, her vacations, her cat. Going by the words, everything is going great.

But Eleanor notices something that feels off. Nick's face is turned toward her, and so, more or less, is his torso. His feet aren't. Both of them point toward the door. And his weight is resting on the leg closest to the exit, as if he were ready to take the first step.

Twenty minutes later, Nick checks his phone. "Sorry, it's my sister, I really have to go. Talk soon?" Eleanor isn't all that surprised. His face was telling her "I'm interested." His feet had been telling her "I'm leaving" for twenty minutes.

Maybe his sister really did call. Maybe Nick was just tired after a rough week. But his feet had announced his exit long before his words did.

This chapter starts from the ground up, with the part of the body we look at least and that, according to many expert observers, we control least: the feet and legs.

Why We Control Our Feet Less Than Our Face

In *What Every BODY Is Saying* (2008), Joe Navarro argues that the feet and legs are the most honest part of the body. Not because they have special powers, but for two very concrete reasons.

The first is ancient. For millions of years, our feet were the tools we used to run from danger and to move toward what we needed: food, water, the group. The emotional brain has always put them to work first. When something frightens us or draws us in, the legs are the first to get ready.

The second reason is upbringing. From early childhood, we learn to control our faces. “Smile at your aunt.” “Don’t make that face.” “Say thank you, even if you don’t like the present.” But nobody ever told us, “Don’t point your feet at the door while Grandma tells her war stories.” We’ve spent years training our faces. Not our feet.

As far back as 1969, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen, in their study of nonverbal “leakage,” had reached the same conclusion: we keep watch over the face and neglect the legs and feet. And that’s where what we feel slips out most easily.

One important clarification, to keep in mind for the whole chapter. “More honest” means “less controlled,” not “a lie detector.” Later research on deception has not found foot and leg movements to be a reliable clue for catching liars. We’ll get to that in Chapter 10. What the feet show well is something else: where a person wants to go, how comfortable they feel, when something shakes them. Comfort and discomfort, once again.

And there’s a practical limit: often you can’t see the feet. They’re under the table, behind a desk, hidden by a bag. We’ll come back to that at the end.

Where the Feet Point

The most useful signal in this whole chapter is also the simplest: look at where the feet are pointing.

Toward What Interests Us

In general, we tend to point our feet toward the people and things that interest us. Two friends enjoying a chat at a café stand with their feet

turned toward each other. A child who wants ice cream points their feet at the counter long before asking for it.

When someone turns their feet toward the exit, toward the hallway, toward another person in the group, they're often saying that their attention is somewhere else. The face may stay polite out of good manners. Meanwhile, the feet have already changed direction.

The Exit Signal

A special case is the foot that turns toward the exit during a conversation. Often it's just one: one foot stays pointed at the other person, while the other rotates toward the door. It's as if part of the person were already on the way out.

Think of the line at the post office. The woman ahead of you is telling you the whole story of the Social Security check that arrived late. You nod, smile, go "Oh, I know." But one of your feet is turned toward the counter, because you're about to be next. If she's paying attention, she sees it and understands this isn't the moment for part two of the story.

It's the same at the office. A coworker stops in your doorway for "something quick," and the something quick lasts ten minutes. If your boss, while listening to you, has their torso turned toward you but one foot pointed toward their desk, they most likely want to get back to work. You can use that information: get to the point, or ask, "Can I grab two minutes now, or would later be better?"

The Group That Opens or Closes

Feet say a lot in groups, too. Navarro describes a situation you've probably lived through a thousand times. Two people are standing and talking, and you walk over. If they want you in the conversation, they turn their feet and torsos toward you and open up the circle. If instead they turn only their heads, or at most their torsos, while their feet stay pointed at each other, they're greeting you kindly, but the conversation is theirs. Say hello, exchange a few words, and move on.

At the coffee machine, at school pickup, at a wedding, this signal will save you from quite a few awkward moments.

Ready to Go

Then there's a position that announces the end of a meeting better than any clock. Seated, the person puts both hands on their knees, shifts their weight forward, and moves one foot slightly back, up on its toes, like a runner in the starting blocks. Navarro considers it a clear intention cue: the body is getting ready to stand up.

When you see this position, the conversation is ending, whether they say so or not. Pushing a new topic usually doesn't work. Better to wrap up well, summarize, and say goodbye.

Happy Feet and Crossed Legs: The Signals of Comfort

Feet don't just show the urge to leave. They also show pleasure, excitement, feeling at home.

Happy Feet

Navarro calls them "happy feet": feet that start to move, bounce, or jiggle when a person gets good news or sees something they want coming their way. It's a small celebration that starts from the ground up, often while the face shows nothing at all.

Daniel is at a car dealership to trade in his old station wagon for a new one. He's expecting a low offer. The salesman looks at the screen and says, "For yours, I can give you six thousand." Daniel keeps a straight face, because he knows he has to negotiate. But under the little table, his leg starts bouncing up and down, and his shoulder quivers slightly. A sharp salesperson notices: that number is above what the customer expected.

But keep the baseline in mind. Lots of people jiggle their legs all the time, out of habit, out of boredom, to burn off energy. In that case, there's nothing to read. The interesting signal is the change: still legs

that start dancing right after some news, or, the other way around, a habitual movement that stops.

And even when the legs are hidden by the table, the movement travels upward: the shoulder sways, the shirt quivers. We'll see shortly how to read what's happening down there without bending over.

Toes Pointing Up

A variation on happy feet is the foot resting only on its heel, with the toes pulled up. You'll see it in a café, in someone on the phone with a person they care about, or in a coworker standing in the hallway telling you how last night's concert went. Navarro calls these "gravity-defying" behaviors: when we're happy, the body gets lighter and lifts; when we're down, it gets heavier and sinks.

Crossed Legs While Standing

Here's a signal almost nobody knows about. When someone stands with their legs crossed, one ankle in front of the other, they're usually comfortable.

The reason is simple: in that position, your balance is precarious. If danger showed up, it would take an extra moment to spring into action. The emotional brain "allows" this position only when it senses no threat. That's why we often see it among friends chatting, in line for ice cream in the summer, at parties.

Here, too, the change is what counts. Two neighbors from the same building are chatting in the courtyard, legs crossed, relaxed. Out of the front door comes the upstairs neighbor they've been fighting with over water damage: in a split second, both of them uncross their legs and plant their feet on the ground. Their bodies have gone back into safety mode before they've even said "Good morning."

Crossed Legs While Seated

Seated, things are more complicated, because crossing your legs is also a matter of habit, comfort, manners, and clothing. A woman in a skirt,

an older man who has always sat that way, someone with a bad back: they all cross their legs for reasons that have nothing to do with the person they're talking to.

Navarro suggests looking at the direction. When two people sitting next to each other like each other or get along, they often cross their legs so that the top knee points toward the other person, and the body opens in that direction. If instead someone crosses their legs so that the leg forms a barrier, with the knee turned the opposite way and the thigh placed between them and the other person, they're probably putting some distance between them.

Once again, timing matters. If at dinner your sister-in-law, whose legs are crossed toward you, uncrosses them and recrosses them the other way right after your joke about her new job, that joke may not have landed.

When the Legs Lock Up

So far we've seen feet that move closer, move away, and celebrate. But the legs are also where you can clearly see the freeze response we talked about in Chapter 1.

The Movement That Stops

Someone is bouncing their foot nonstop while you talk about summer plans. Then you ask, "And with your brother, did you two ever sort things out about the beach house?" The foot locks. It stays still for the whole answer. It's a small freeze: the topic touched something.

The same happens to someone standing who stops shifting their weight from one leg to the other and plants themselves. Or to the teenager on the couch, bouncing a foot while watching the game, who stops dead when Dad walks in holding the report card.

Feet That Pull Back

Another sign of discomfort is pulling the feet back. Someone who was sitting with their legs stretched out or their feet forward suddenly

draws them back, under the chair. Sometimes they hook them around the chair legs, as if to anchor themselves. Sometimes they interlock their ankles and squeeze them.

Navarro observes that interlocked ankles, squeezed tight under the chair, are common at tense moments: job interviews, interrogations, the dentist's waiting room. It's a way of holding back, of "holding still."

Here you need a lot of caution. Many people habitually sit with their ankles crossed, and many women were taught as girls that it's the polite way to sit. If someone sits like that from start to finish, that's their baseline. The signal is the shift: relaxed feet out in front that, after a question, retreat under the chair and lock tight.

The Nervous Kick

There's a movement that's different from rhythmic, habitual bouncing. A person sitting with their legs crossed suddenly gives a little kick forward with the top foot, or a series of sharp jerks. Navarro reads it as a reaction of discomfort, almost a way of "kicking away" something unpleasant. It often happens right after hearing something they don't like.

The difference from happy feet lies in the rhythm and the timing. Happy bouncing is soft and continuous, and it starts with good news. The kick is abrupt and jerky, and it starts with an unwelcome remark. If you see it right after something you said, ask yourself how it went over.

The Leg Cleanser

Then there's a gesture halfway between the legs and the hands, which we mentioned in Chapter 1 among the pacifying behaviors: the leg cleanser, the palms sliding along the thighs toward the knees to wipe off sweat and calm down. It interests us here because it almost always happens under the table, where the person doing it feels hidden.

You don't need to see the hands: you see the arms dropping below the tabletop and the shoulders moving back and forth. If it starts right after a specific question, you have one more clue to add to the cluster.

The Wide Stance

Finally, when tension turns into a challenge, the legs spread. Someone getting ready for a confrontation tends to widen their base while standing, to plant themselves firmly, as if to take up more space and find stability. You see it in heated arguments in a bar, between two drivers after a fender bender, between a bouncer and a customer. It's the "legs" version of the fight response we saw in Chapter 1. We'll see how it can become a tool for intimidation toward the end of the book.

A Look Under the Table

We've said that the feet are often invisible. Here's how to read them anyway, without bending down to peer under the table like a cartoon detective.

Watch the shoulders and torso. Every movement of the legs travels upward. A bouncing leg makes the shoulder sway. A foot that pulls back moves the torso back a little. A kick makes the body jolt.

Listen. Heels tapping on the floor, a creaking chair, the sound of shoes shuffling. Often the signal reaches your ears before your eyes.

Pick the right seat. When you can, sit at an angle rather than directly across. From there you can see part of the other person's legs out of the corner of your eye without doing anything odd. A glass table, or a conversation on a couch, is even better.

Use the transitions. When people stand up, sit down, come in, or leave, their legs are visible. Those are the best moments to gather their baseline.

IN PRACTICE

The 5:40 p.m. Meeting

Beatrice is a project manager at a software company. On Friday at 5:30 p.m., she gathers the three people on her team for a stand-up meeting in front of the whiteboard to present next month's plan. She has known all of them for at least a year, so she has a good baseline.

Henry, the most experienced developer, is standing near the door. Both of his feet are pointed toward the hallway, and every so often he checks his watch. For a moment Beatrice is irritated: "He couldn't care less." Then she remembers the context. On Fridays, Henry picks up his daughter from the gym at 6:00. The feet pointed at the exit are his schedule, not a verdict on the plan. Beatrice makes a mental note: today she can't expect Henry's attention after 5:50. She asks for his opinion first, while he's still with them.

Camille, the graphic designer, is leaning against the back wall, standing with her legs crossed and her feet pointed toward Beatrice. Loose, attentive. Then Beatrice gets to the item about Saturday shifts for the end-of-month release. Camille uncrosses her legs, plants both feet firmly, and pushes off from the wall. At the same moment, she stops taking notes. It's a sharp change, triggered by a specific topic, and it's two or three signals at once.

Evan, the youngest, is sitting on a stool and has been bouncing his leg since he came in, as always. When Beatrice talks about the cuts to the training budget, the leg stops. It stays still for the entire item. It starts up again when Beatrice moves on to the next topic.

Beatrice doesn't draw conclusions in front of everyone. But she has two hypotheses to work with: Saturdays are a problem for Camille, and the training course matters more to Evan than he has ever said. On Monday morning she has coffee with each of them separately. Camille explains that she has just started looking after her elderly mother on Saturdays. Evan admits he was counting on that course to grow.

Two problems that would have blown up at the end of the month, uncovered in ten minutes by looking from the waist down.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake with feet and legs is taking a moving leg as a sign of nervousness or, worse, of lying.

It's an extremely widespread belief: "They're bouncing their leg, they're nervous." "They're bouncing their leg, they're hiding something." In reality, lots of people move their legs constantly, in every situation, out of habit. They do it in front of the TV, at restaurants, in the car at a red light. If you judge them by that, they'll always look nervous to you.

What's more, even when the movement appears suddenly, it may mean opposite things. It may be discomfort, of course. But it may be impatience, boredom, the cold, too much coffee, or, as we saw with Daniel at the dealership, joy being held back. Same movement, completely different readings.

How do you avoid it? By applying the four rules, in order. Baseline: Do they always do that? Clusters: are there other signals pointing the same way, or is the movement isolated? Context: is there a simple explanation, like the cold or being in a rush? Change: did it start or stop at a specific moment? If the movement is habitual, isolated, and not tied to a specific moment, let it go. If instead it changes right after a question, together with other signals, then yes, it's worth asking yourself why.

And remember that the direction of the feet is almost always more informative than their movement. A foot that turns toward the door after a question says more than a hundred bounces.

EXERCISE

A week of looking down. For seven days, shift your attention from faces to feet in everyday situations.

1. **A coffee shop or a park (days 1 and 2).** Pick a place where people talk standing up: a coffee shop line, school pickup, a dog park, or a lobby. Watch groups of two or three people. Where are their feet pointing? Who is included and who is merely tolerated? Note three pairs or groups.
2. **The prediction (days 3 and 4).** When you see two people talking, try to predict who will end the conversation by looking at their feet. Look for the foot that turns toward the exit, or the runner's starting position when seated. Then check whether your prediction was right.
3. **Crossed legs (day 5).** Count how many people you see standing with their legs crossed, and in which situations. If you see someone suddenly uncross their legs, note what had just happened.
4. **The meeting or the dinner (day 6).** At a meeting or a dinner, sit at an angle to someone you know. Without ever bending down, watch their shoulders and torso to guess what their legs are doing. Note the moment when the movement stops or starts.
5. **Your own feet (day 7).** For an entire day, check every so often where your feet are pointing during conversations. You'll notice how often they're pointed where you'd like to be, not where you are.
6. **The tally.** Reread your notes. How many of your predictions were right? In how many cases did the context explain everything on its own?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Feet and legs are less controlled than the face: they're good at showing comfort, discomfort, and the urge to leave, not lies.
- Feet tend to point toward what interests us: a foot turned toward the exit often announces the end of a conversation.
- Crossed legs while standing usually signal comfort; uncrossing them suddenly signals an alarm.
- Happy feet, feet that go still, feet that pull back, and the nervous kick only count as a change from the baseline.
- You can read legs under the table from the shoulders, the torso, and the sounds, without bending down.
- The direction of the feet almost always says more than their movement.

Torso and Shoulders

Saturday morning, the coffee shop around the corner. Fiona is forty-one, works at a pharmacy, and has finally worked up the courage to tell her friend Gloria that she's been seeing a man for three months. She waited to say anything because he's recently separated, and she knows Gloria has firm opinions about this kind of thing.

Gloria listens. She smiles. She says: "Oh, come on, that's wonderful, I'm so happy for you." The words are right, and so is the tone.

And yet Fiona senses something that doesn't add up. Right on the word "separated," Gloria's torso turned a few degrees toward the front window. Not much: just enough that her chest was no longer facing her friend. Her purse, which had been sitting on the chair next to her, is now on her lap, held with both hands. Her shoulders rose slightly, the way they do when it's cold, and stayed there.

Gloria isn't lying, at least not in the classic sense. She probably does care about Fiona and really does want her to be happy. But her torso is saying something else at the same time: "I don't like this, it worries me, and I don't know how to tell you."

This chapter is about the part of the body between the neck and the waist. It looks like a solid, motionless block. In reality, it shifts, turns, closes, and opens all the time, almost always without the person noticing.

The Torso Goes Where Interest Goes

Let's start with a simple idea. The torso holds the things that keep us alive: heart, lungs, stomach, liver. In *What Every BODY Is Saying* (2008), Joe Navarro explains that this is why the emotional brain treats it with great care. When we like something, we feel safe and we expose it. When something threatens us or makes us uncomfortable, we move it, turn it, cover it.

So the torso moves toward what attracts us and away from what repels us, even if only by an inch or two.

As early as 1969, the psychologist Albert Mehrabian studied how posture communicates our attitude toward another person. Among the most consistent signals of liking and involvement, he found exactly these two: leaning forward toward the person speaking and keeping the torso oriented toward them. Someone who leans toward you while you're talking is following along. Someone who leans back in their chair and stays there while you get fired up is putting some distance between you. It isn't a mathematical law, but it's not far off.

A few everyday examples.

You're in a meeting, presenting an idea. Two coworkers lean over the table; one of them rests their elbows on it and brings their face closer. The fourth, Max, sinks back in his chair, shoulders against the backrest. He hasn't said a word. But his torso has already voted.

You're at dinner with someone you've only recently met. When you talk about your work, she sits up straight, polite. When you move on to a trip to Portugal, her torso slides forward an inch or two and stays there. You've found the topic that interests her.

On the other hand, picture yourself at the bank. The advisor is pitching you an investment product. Without thinking, you lean back in your chair right as the advisor says, "with just a small ten-year lock-in." Your torso understood before you did that you don't like that clause.

This is where the book's fourth rule applies: changes matter more than positions. Some people always lean back in their chair because they

have a bad back, because the chair is uncomfortable, or because that's their baseline. The real signal comes when, after a specific remark, that torso suddenly pulls away from the backrest or drops back into it.

Turning the Torso: Ventral Denial

Navarro has a term that captures the idea well: "ventral denial," which roughly means denying someone your front. The ventral side is the side of the belly and chest. When we like someone, we offer it to them: we face them, chest to chest, even from three feet away. When something bothers us, we rotate our torso and offer a side, or a shoulder.

The opposite is called "ventral fronting," meaning squarely facing someone. It's what two friends who haven't seen each other in a long time do in the middle of a busy sidewalk, while the whole world around them disappears.

Torso rotation is one of the most useful signals in this book because it's hard to keep under control. Lots of people know they should smile and nod. Very few think about their own chest.

A three-way conversation at the coffee machine. Mike, Irene, and Gabe. Irene and Gabe have their torsos turned toward each other; Mike gets only shoulders and sides. Mike is in the group, but only with his feet and his words: with their bodies, the other two are leaving him out. Maybe it isn't dislike. Maybe they're talking about something that only concerns them. But if Mike really wants to get into the conversation, the first thing to do is wait for their torsos to open back up toward him.

A meeting with the principal about a problem with your son. The principal sees you sitting across the desk, then, when you bring up a specific incident of bullying, swivels his chair sideways toward the computer "to check something." Maybe he really does need to check something. But if the rotation comes right on that sentence and he never turns back to face you, you have a clue that the topic makes him uncomfortable.

A family dinner. Your sister says she wants to leave her steady job to start her own business. Your father keeps eating, his torso turned toward the TV, which is on. He hasn't said anything against it. But his body has taken itself out of the conversation.

Two nuances, so you don't get it wrong.

The first: space. If the table is narrow, the chairs are fixed, or the room is crowded, turning the torso may just be a matter of comfort. Before you read a rotation, ask yourself whether the person could have sat any other way.

The second: partial rotation. Often it isn't a ninety-degree turn. It's fifteen or twenty degrees. Sometimes only the upper body turns, while the hips stay where they are. It's easier to spot if you look at the line of the shoulders or the buttons on the shirt: where are they "pointing"?

And here the second rule comes back: never a single signal. A torso that rotates, on its own, says little. A torso that rotates while the answers get shorter, the eyes look for the clock, and the feet turn toward the door (we covered that in Chapter 3) tells a much clearer story.

Protecting the Belly

There's another way to distance yourself from something without moving: putting something in front of you. Navarro calls this behavior "torso shielding." When we feel vulnerable, we look for a shield for the most delicate part of the body. Often it's an object.

The purse that rises from the lap to the chest. The couch cushion that ends up over the belly during an argument with your partner. The folder held like a tray in front of the stomach, standing in the hallway, while the boss calls you into the office "for a minute." The coffee mug gripped with both hands at chest height. The open laptop on the table, between you and the other person, even when you don't need it.

Clothes can act as a shield too. Navarro notes that when people feel uncomfortable, they may button their jacket, zip up, pull their cardigan closed across the front. When they relax, they unbutton and open

up. You can see it clearly in job interviews: sometimes the candidate unbuttons their jacket halfway through, as the tension drops.

Then there are the arms, the closest shield we have. We'll cover them properly in the next chapter, because they deserve a space of their own. For now, just one thing: even a single arm crossing the body, maybe to adjust a watch or the cuff on the other hand, creates a barrier. People often do it when they walk into a room full of strangers.

How do you read these shields without overdoing it?

First, look at the timing. A purse on the lap from the beginning to the end of the conversation may mean there's nowhere else to put it, or that the person is afraid of forgetting it. A purse that rises onto the lap right when a specific topic comes up is something else.

Second, look at how it's held. A cushion resting in the lap with relaxed hands is comfort. A cushion clutched against the belly with the fingers sunk into it is a defensive hug.

Third, look at whether the shield goes away. When the other person relaxes, the shield usually comes down: the mug goes back on the table, the folder ends up under the arm, the jacket opens again. That moment is precious, because it tells you that you've put the other person back at ease.

If the belly looks for cover behind objects, the upper torso speaks in its own way, with nothing in its hands.

The Shoulders: Raised, Half-Raised, Dropping

The shoulders are very expressive, and they have one advantage: you can see them even from far away, above a table, on a video call where the rest of the body is cropped out.

The full shrug. Both shoulders rising together, high, maybe with the hands opening and the eyebrows lifting. It's one of the most widespread gestures in the world, and it means, more or less, "I don't know," "What can I do?", "It's not up to me." In 1969, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen classified it among the "emblems": gestures with a pre-

cise meaning, almost like a word, that anyone in the same culture can translate. When it's full and symmetrical, it's usually sincere.

The half shrug. This is where things get interesting. In *Telling Lies* (1985), Ekman describes what he calls an “emblematic slip”: a gesture that leaks out in reduced form, outside its natural place. One example is exactly the half shrug, maybe just one shoulder, barely there, appearing while the person is saying something confident in words. “Yes, I sent the quote,” with one shoulder lifting slightly. Navarro observes the same thing: a weak or lopsided shrug often signals little conviction in what's being said.

Careful: that doesn't mean the person is lying. It means there's a “meh” inside them that the words aren't saying. It may be uncertainty, it may be that they didn't really check, it may be that they don't care. It's a good starting point for one more question, asked calmly: “Do you remember who you sent it to?”

Shoulders that rise toward the ears and stay there. Navarro calls it “the turtle effect”: the neck disappears, and the head seems to pull back into its shell. It's the body of someone who would like to make themselves small. You see it in a child being scolded by the teacher, in an employee when the boss raises their voice in a meeting, in a fan when the kicker misses the game-winning field goal. It often comes together with a torso that curls forward. It signals embarrassment, insecurity, a wish to disappear.

Be careful not to confuse it with the cold, which produces the same posture, or with the stiff neck of someone who spends eight hours a day at a computer. The guiding question is still the same: did the shoulders rise after a specific remark? And when the subject changes, do they come back down?

Shoulders that drop. There's a good kind of drop, the drop of relief: the person has just found out the exam went well, breathes out, and the shoulders come down. The torso loosens, the arms hang more softly. It's a wonderful signal to notice, because it tells you some tension has just melted away.

And there's the drop of surrender. The shoulders fall forward, the chest caves in, the head sinks. It's the body of someone who has stopped fighting. You see it in someone walking out of the doctor's office after bad news, in someone who has just failed their driving test, in the teenager who has just figured out that the car keys aren't happening tonight. If you notice it in someone during an argument, it often means that, for them, the argument is over, even if the words keep going.

Puffing Up and Deflating

We've seen that the torso moves closer, pulls away, rotates, and protects itself. There's one last movement: it changes volume. It puffs up and it deflates.

In 2008, the psychologists Jessica Tracy and David Matsumoto analyzed photographs of judo athletes at the 2004 Olympic and Paralympic Games, taken right after a win or a loss. Among them were athletes who had been blind from birth, who had never seen anyone celebrate. And yet the winners, sighted and blind alike, expanded their chests, raised their arms, and tilted their heads back. The losers let their shoulders slump and their chests cave in.

This tells us something important: puffing up in success and deflating in defeat isn't just something we learn from watching movies. It seems to be a very ancient reaction that the body produces on its own.

The coworker who has just closed a deal walks into the office with a broader chest and shoulders back, taking up more space with their body. The neighbor who wins the argument at the condo association meeting leans back in their chair and spreads their shoulders. By contrast, the kid who got a bad grade comes home with their torso closed in, as if they wanted to take up as little air as possible.

Then there's the puffing up of confrontation. Two people arguing in the street over a parking spot. The torso rises, the chest pushes forward, the shoulders widen, the breathing gets deeper and more visible. It's the body getting ready for a fight and trying to look bigger to discourage the opponent. When you see this in an argument, it's time

to bring the temperature down, not up. We'll talk about how some people deliberately use their bodies to intimidate toward the end of the book, when we tackle manipulation.

Two words of caution.

The first: a habitual posture isn't a personality. Some people always stand straight because they danced for twenty years, some stoop because they're very tall and were self-conscious about it as teenagers, some have backs worn out by construction work. Don't read someone's baseline posture as "they're arrogant" or "they're depressed." Read the changes.

The second: breathing is part of the torso. A chest that rises and falls faster than normal during a calm conversation tells you that something inside is speeding up. You don't know what: it could be anger, fear, excitement, even joy. But you know there's an emotion in motion, and you know which remark it arrived with.

IN PRACTICE

The Condo Association Meeting

Alexandra is fifty-two, teaches math, and sits on the board of her condo association. For months she has been pushing to have the roof replaced: there are leaks on the top floor, and the family who lives there, the Farrells, already has a patch of mold in their bedroom. Tonight is the association meeting. She needs the votes.

The building's community room is small, with plastic chairs in three rows. The property manager, Mr. Whitman, presents the bids. Alexandra doesn't watch him. She watches everyone else.

The Farrells, of course, are leaning forward, elbows on their knees. Mr. Collins, from the second floor, is leaning back with his arms spread across the empty chairs beside him: that's how he always sits, she knows him, it doesn't mean a thing.

When the property manager announces the total, Alexandra sees three things almost at once. Mrs. Ross from the third floor picks her purse up off the floor and holds it on her lap with both hands. Young Josh, who just bought his unit with a mortgage, raises his shoulders toward his ears and keeps them there. And Mr. Collins finally pulls away from the backrest: not forward, but turning toward his wife, swiveling his torso sideways, away from the property manager.

Three bodies, three similar messages: the number is scary.

But Alexandra notices something else too. When Mr. Whitman explains that the work can be paid for in six installments, Josh lowers his shoulders and lets out a breath. Mrs. Ross doesn't: the purse stays put. For her, the problem isn't how to pay. It's something else.

During the break, Alexandra doesn't make a speech. She walks over to Mrs. Ross and simply asks: "What's your take on it?" After a while, Mrs. Ross admits that last time, the work on the building's exterior took twice as long as planned, and she had scaffolding outside her window for a year. It isn't the cost. It's trust in the contractor.

When the meeting resumes, Alexandra proposes adding a penalty clause for delays to the contract. As the property manager enters it into the minutes, Mrs. Ross's purse goes back on the floor.

The roof replacement passes by a single vote.

Alexandra didn't "read anyone's mind." She knew Mr. Collins's baseline and wasn't fooled by his sprawling posture. She watched for changes, at the precise moment the number was announced. She put several signals together. And above all, she used what she saw to ask a better question, not to jump to a conclusion.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most widespread mistake with the torso and shoulders is turning a posture into a judgment about the person. "They're always hunched over, they're insecure." "They always stick their chest out, they're arrogant." "They lean back in their chair, they couldn't care less."

These are quick conclusions, and almost always wrong, for three reasons.

The first is physical. Posture depends on the back, weight, height, chairs, shoes, fatigue. Someone who has worked ten hours on their feet leans back because they're tired, not because they're uninterested. A very tall young woman may have stooped a little her whole life.

The second is habit. A former Marine will keep his shoulders squared even at his granddaughter's Christmas pageant; someone who spends the day hunched over a coffee-shop counter or a supermarket register will carry that back home to dinner too.

The third is logic. A posture that doesn't change tells you nothing about the conversation you're having. It only tells you how that person is in general. That's the baseline, and the baseline isn't interpreted: it's recorded.

How do you avoid it? Every time an adjective about the person pops into your head (“they’re closed off,” “they’re stuck-up”), stop and replace it with a question about the moment: “Since when have they been closed off like this? After what?” If you can’t answer, you don’t have a signal. You only have a posture.

There’s a twin mistake, less common but more dangerous: reading a single shift as proof. “They turned away when I mentioned the wire transfer, so they’re hiding something from me.” Maybe. Or maybe they just got a text, heard a noise, or had a leg that had fallen asleep. A body signal isn’t a verdict. It’s the exact point where it’s worth asking one more question.

EXERCISE

This week you'll train your eye on the torso and shoulders. You need five days and no equipment.

1. **Day 1, the baseline.** Choose three people you see every day (a coworker, a family member, the barista). For each one, note on your phone what their normal posture is like: straight or stooped, leaning back or sitting forward, shoulders high or low. Don't interpret, describe.
2. **Day 2, rotation.** In every conversation with three or more people, ask yourself: who are the torsos pointing toward? Who gets chests and who gets sides? Note at least one case where the orientation changes during the conversation, and what was being said at that moment.
3. **Day 3, shields.** Count how many times you see someone put an object in front of their torso: a purse, a cushion, a mug, a folder, a laptop. For each one, ask yourself: was it there from the start, or did it show up after a specific remark? And when did it go away?
4. **Day 4, the shoulders.** Pay attention to shrugs. How many are full and symmetrical, and how many are half shrugs or one-shouldered? When you see a half shrug, notice whether the words were saying something confident. Don't say anything: just observe.
5. **Day 5, your own torso.** Repeat the observation on yourself. In a meeting or at dinner, notice when you lean in, when you lean back, when you turn your shoulder on someone, when you pick something up and hold it in front of you. You'll be surprised how much your body moves without asking your permission.

At the end, reread your notes and look for a case where two or three signals came together: that's the kind of reading you can start to trust.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The torso moves toward what we like and away from what bothers us: the shift is what counts, not the position.
- Turning your chest away (“ventral denial”) is one of the most honest and least controlled signals of discomfort.
- Purses, cushions, mugs, folders, and buttoned jackets can become shields: watch when they show up and when they go away.
- A full shrug is a sincere “I don’t know”; a half shrug, or a one-shouldered one, often signals little conviction.
- Shoulders that rise and stay up point to a wish to make yourself small; shoulders that drop can mean relief or surrender.
- Never turn a habitual posture into a judgment about character: baseline first, then changes.

Arms and Hands

Tuesday evening, in the conference room of a small furniture company outside the city. Megan, twenty-nine, is in her first month as a sales rep, and she's presenting her plan for new clients to the owner, Mr. Gallagher. She has prepared everything: the slides, the numbers, the examples.

Two minutes in, Mr. Gallagher crosses his arms over his chest. Megan notices, and something tightens in her stomach. She's read it a thousand times: crossed arms signal a closed mind, rejection, "You're not convincing me." She speeds up. She skips two slides. She starts justifying things nobody asked her about. By the end, her voice is shaking a little.

Mr. Gallagher looks at her, uncrosses his arms, and says: "Nice. I really like the part about the clients in the suburbs. But tell me, why did you go so fast at the end?" Then he adds, almost to himself: "It's freezing in here with this AC. I need to tell my daughter to dial it back."

Mr. Gallagher was cold. That's all. And Megan, convinced she knew how to read body language, ruined the best part of her presentation chasing a signal that wasn't there.

This chapter is here precisely to help you avoid scenes like that one. Arms and hands are the part of the body with more myths circulating about them than any other. They're also, if you look closely, among the richest in real information. Let's see how to tell the two apart.

Crossed Arms and Arms That Pull Back

Let's start with the most famous myth. Crossed arms are presented almost everywhere as the ultimate signal of being closed off and hostile. The reality is simpler, and more interesting.

People cross their arms for all kinds of reasons: because they're cold, because it's comfortable on a chair with no armrests, because they don't know what to do with their hands, to listen better by "drawing themselves in," or out of discomfort or anger. One gesture, many meanings.

There's also a curious study that turns the cliché upside down. In 2008, Ronald Friedman and Andrew Elliot gave a group of students anagrams that were impossible to solve. Those who had to keep their arms crossed during the task kept trying longer before giving up than those who kept their hands on their thighs. This isn't proof that crossing your arms makes you more persistent in life, and it's just one study. But it reminds us that this gesture isn't automatically a "no": sometimes it goes hand in hand with concentration.

So how do you read crossed arms? With the book's rules, which you know by now.

Look at the baseline: some people cross their arms the moment they sit down, every time. Look at the timing: did the arms cross suddenly after a specific sentence, or were they like that already? Look at the rest of the body: is the torso pulling away, is the jaw tightening, is the gaze turning hard? Or is the person nodding, smiling, leaning in?

Then look at how they're crossed. Navarro makes a useful distinction. There are relaxed crossed arms, resting loosely on the chest, with calm hands. And there are arms that cling: fingers digging into fabric or flesh, knuckles turning white, the torso hunching forward. This second kind is almost a hug you give yourself, a way to hold yourself together and calm down. You see it in the ER waiting room, not over coffee with friends.

Finally: do the crossed arms come undone? If at some point in the conversation the person uncrosses their arms, leans in, and starts ges-

turing, that's a change. And it's the change, not the earlier position, that tells you something.

There's a movement of the arms that's far more reliable than crossing them, and almost nobody watches for it: withdrawal.

When we're at ease, our arms move freely. They stretch across the table, rest on the back of the chair next to us, move along with our words. When something makes us uncomfortable, the arms tend to come back in close to the body. Elbows press against the sides, hands gather in the lap, and sometimes the arms stop moving altogether. Navarro, who spent years observing interrogations for the FBI, notes that the arms are among the first parts of the body to "pull back in" when an uncomfortable question arrives.

Picture a sixteen-year-old telling his parents about Saturday night's party. He talks about the music, his friends, and his hands are flying. Then his mother asks: "And what time did you get home?" His arms drop to his sides or get wedged between his knees. The story goes on, but his hands have stopped taking part.

This doesn't prove the boy is lying about the time. It proves the question changed his state of mind. Maybe they did get home late, maybe he's just dreading a lecture, maybe something happened that he's ashamed of. The signal tells you where the tension is, not why.

The opposite is just as useful. When people feel confident, their arms spread out and take up space. An arm draped over the back of the next chair. Elbows wide on the table. Standing with hands on hips, elbows out. That last posture, which Navarro describes as a way of claiming space and asserting your presence, is one you often see in people who are in charge: the foreman on a construction site, the coach on the sideline, the traffic cop holding up traffic. It isn't necessarily aggressive, but it says: "This is my space."

Hands That Hide, Hands That Show

From the arms we move down to the hands, which we watch constantly without even realizing it. It's an ancient instinct: when some-

one approaches, the hands are the first place our eyes go, to figure out whether they're carrying a weapon or coming in peace.

That's why hidden hands make us a little uneasy. Hands in pockets during an important conversation, hands under the table, hands behind the back. Navarro maintains that in an interview or a negotiation, people who keep their hands out of sight tend to be seen as less honest, even when there's no reason at all.

But this calls for common sense. Someone with their hands in their pockets at the bus stop in January is cold. Someone with their hands under the table at dinner may simply be resting them in their lap. Hands clasped behind the back on a stroll are the classic pose of someone browsing in a museum or watching a construction site, and they usually signal nothing more than calm and a bit of distance ("I'm looking, not touching").

The real signal, once again, is the change. Someone who was gesturing freely and, at one specific question, makes their hands disappear under the table. The real estate agent who shows you the two-bedroom with big, open gestures and who, the moment you ask how much the HOA fees are, slides their hands into their coat pockets.

Then there are the palms. Showing open palms is an age-old gesture of goodwill: "I have nothing to hide," "Look, I'm unarmed," "What can I do?" But be careful. It's also one of the gestures taught most often in sales and communication courses, precisely because it conveys trust. Open palms, on their own, prove nothing. People who want to look sincere show them on purpose.

Steeples, Thumbs, and Wringing Hands

When the hands stay in sight, what are they doing? Some gestures reveal right away how confident someone feels in that moment. Navarro sorts them into two broad families: those that "defy gravity," moving up and outward, and those that close in and shrink.

Steepling. The fingertips of both hands touch, the palms stay apart, and the shape they make resembles a church steeple. It's one of the

clearest confidence displays there is. Lawyers, doctors, executives, and professors do it often: people who, in that moment, feel they have full command of their subject. Sometimes the steeple is high, in front of the face; sometimes it's low, on the table or in the lap. When someone goes from steepling to interlaced fingers, maybe tightly squeezed, they've probably lost some of that confidence.

Thumbs. It sounds like a detail, but thumbs are a small thermometer. Thumbs that rise, that stick up out of pockets or fists, that point upward when the hands are clasped: according to Navarro, they're usually the sign of someone comfortable with themselves and with the topic. Thumbs that disappear, tucked inside a fist or slid into a pocket with the other fingers left outside, more often signal insecurity. Try watching them in a meeting, when the boss is talking and when the newest hire is talking.

Wringing hands. Hands rubbing against each other, fingers lacing together and squeezing, one thumb massaging the other, fingers playing with a ring or a wedding band. These are pacifying behaviors, the kind we talked about in Chapter 1: the body trying to calm itself down on its own, the way someone stroked us when we were children. The higher the tension climbs, the more visible they become: from a light rubbing of the fingertips to hands twisting like a towel being wrung out.

Here too, context matters. Some people have played with their ring ever since they started wearing it, out of pure habit. Some rub their hands because they've just used hand sanitizer, or because they're cold, or because they're about to eat something delicious. The rub of anticipation, the one that says "Let's eat," is quick and cheerful. The rub of tension is slow, insistent, and usually comes with a face that isn't smiling.

Hands That Talk Along with the Words

Italy has a special relationship with this topic. In 1832, a Neapolitan priest and archaeologist, Andrea de Jorio, published an entire book on the gestures of the people of Naples, convinced they could help

explain the paintings of antiquity. Almost a century and a half later, in 1979, the ethologist Desmond Morris and his colleagues traveled across Europe to map how dozens of gestures were distributed, and Italy turned out to be one of the richest territories. In Italy, gesturing isn't the exception: it's the norm.

In 1969, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen identified several families of body movements. Two concern us here. "Emblems" are gestures with a precise meaning even without words: the thumbs-up, the "OK" circle with thumb and forefinger, a finger pressed to the lips for "quiet," or, in Italy, the fingertips pinched together for "What are you talking about?" "Illustrators" are the gestures that accompany speech: hands that sketch the shape of an object, beat out the rhythm of the words, point in a direction.

Illustrators aren't decoration. They help us think and speak. In 1996, Frances Rauscher, Robert Krauss, and Yihsiu Chen asked a group of volunteers to describe a cartoon full of movement through space, first while free to gesture and then with their hands held still. With their hands restrained, their speech faltered precisely when they had to explain where the characters were going. In 2001, Susan Goldin-Meadow and colleagues showed that people who gesture while explaining a math problem are better at remembering, at the same time, a list of letters they've been asked to keep in mind: moving your hands seems to lighten the brain's workload.

That's why it's so meaningful when illustrators change.

In *Telling Lies* (1985), Ekman observes that illustrators tend to decrease when a person is choosing their words carefully, when they're not very involved in what they're saying, or when they're thinking hard. Aldert Vrij, in *Detecting Lies and Deceit* (2008), also reports that liars tend, on average, to move their hands and fingers less, not more: the opposite of the fidgety liar in the movies. We'll cover this properly in Chapter 10. For now, one idea is enough: hands that go still tell you the mind is working in a different way.

Picture Peter, forty-five, a plumber, telling you about his latest job. He gestures like an orchestra conductor: the pipes, the water heater, the

customer who was yelling. Then you ask how much he made on that job. His hands settle on the table and stay there. It could be discretion about money, it could be that he's doing the math, it could be that there's something he doesn't want to say. You don't know. But you do know the question took him somewhere else.

The opposite is just as useful: when a very composed person suddenly starts gesturing, they've usually found a topic that really lights them up.

Touch

Up to now, the hands have stayed in the air. But sometimes they cross those last few inches and touch the other person. Physical contact is one of the most powerful and delicate signals there is: its meaning changes completely depending on who starts it, with whom, where, and at what moment.

A few classic studies show how strong even the lightest contact can be. In 1976, Jeffrey Fisher, Marvin Rytting, and Richard Heslin had a librarian briefly brush students' hands as she handed back their library cards. Those who had been touched went on to rate both the librarian and the library more positively, and many of them hadn't even noticed the contact. In 1984, April Crusco and Christopher Wetzel observed that waitresses who briefly touched customers on the hand or shoulder while giving them their change received bigger tips.

But touch isn't only about warmth. In 1973, the psychologist Nancy Henley proposed that touch often follows hierarchy: people higher up touch people lower down more readily than the other way around. The boss rests a hand on an employee's shoulder; the reverse rarely happens. The doctor touches the patient's arm. Later research has found a more nuanced picture, but the idea is still useful as a question to ask yourself: is this touch mutual? Could I return it just as naturally?

Then there's culture. In 1966, the psychologist Sidney Jourard counted how many times couples sitting in cafés touched each other in an hour, in different cities around the world. In San Juan and Paris there was

a great deal of touching; in London, practically none. Mediterranean and Latin American cultures usually fall on the high-touch side: a hand on the arm while telling a story, a pat on the shoulder, a hug or a kiss on the cheek even with new acquaintances. Even within the same country, habits vary: a warm hug in the American South or a pat on the shoulder in a big Italian family doesn't carry the same weight as it would in a reserved New England town. Reading a touch always requires knowing the baseline of both the person and their background.

So how do you read it?

Watch who starts it and who pulls away. If someone takes your elbow by the coffee machine and you notice you've drawn it back half an inch, your body has already told you how it feels. If you're the one touching and the other person stiffens, takes a step back, or pulls their arms in close to their body, take it as clear information: they don't want it. You stop. Period.

Watch the timing. A touch that arrives just as the other person is about to say no to you, or while they're asking you for something important, deserves a little extra attention. We'll talk about how some people use touch to dominate or to push a decision in Chapter 14.

IN PRACTICE

The Dentist's Estimate

Ray is fifty-eight, drives a cab in the city, and has been putting off a trip to the dentist for months. He finally goes, to a new practice near his home. Dr. Martin, a woman of about forty, gives him a thorough exam and then invites him into her office to talk about the treatment plan.

As soon as he sits down, Ray crosses his arms. He always does: he spends all day in the car, and whenever he sits down somewhere, that's how he settles in. The dentist doesn't seem to pay any attention to it, and neither does he.

The dentist explains the problems calmly. Her hands are steepled above the desk; then she picks up a pen and draws a tooth on a sheet of paper, pointing out the roots. Her hands move with confidence, thumbs in plain view. Ray, who usually doesn't trust doctors, notices his shoulders starting to relax.

Then comes the estimate. Three implants. The number is high.

Ray notices his own body before he even has a thought: his arms, already crossed, are now squeezing. The fingers of his right hand press hard into his left arm. He breathes and tells himself to stay calm.

But there's more. When he asks, "Are all three implants really necessary, or can the third one wait?" something happens in the dentist's hands. The steeple comes apart. Her fingers interlace, and her thumbs disappear inside her clasped hands. For a few seconds she stops drawing. Her answer comes more slowly: "In theory, it could wait... it depends."

Ray doesn't jump to conclusions. But the change is right there, on that last question: first steepled hands and visible thumbs, then closed fingers and words that slow down. It doesn't prove the dentist is trying to rip him off with an extra implant; it only proves that this point makes her uncomfortable, maybe because the honest answer is "Yes, it can wait," and she's afraid of losing the work.

So Ray does what anyone should do: he asks for more, calmly. "Tell me honestly, if it were your mother, what would you do about the third one?" The dentist smiles, and her hands go back to the sheet of paper. "I'd wait a year and keep an eye on it."

Ray walks out with a two-stage plan and a smaller estimate. He hasn't unmasked anyone. He simply noticed where the conversation got difficult and went back to it.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake with arms and hands is trusting gesture dictionaries. You know those lists that make the rounds online: crossed arms equal closed off, hand over the mouth equals lying, touching your nose equals deception, hands in pockets equals hiding something? They're easy to remember and almost always wrong.

The reason is simple. Hands do a thousand things that have nothing to do with emotions: they scratch an itch, adjust glasses, warm up, hold the phone, play with keys out of habit. A single gesture, read like a word in a dictionary, leads you astray more often than it helps. As we'll see in Chapter 10, no single gesture has been found to be a reliable sign of lying.

The second mistake, less obvious, is watching only the big gestures and missing the small ones. Everyone notices the person who bangs a fist on the table. Few notice thumbs that disappear, fingers that stop drawing in the air, an arm that pulls back four inches when a certain question comes up.

How do you avoid both mistakes? Change the question you ask yourself. Not "What does this gesture mean?" but "What were those hands doing a minute ago, and after which sentence did they change rhythm?" That's where the real part of the conversation is almost always hiding.

EXERCISE

This week you're training your eye on hands. You can do it anywhere: at work, at a café, in front of the TV.

1. **Watch an interview with the sound off.** Pick a talk show or a political interview online, mute it, and watch only the guest's hands for five minutes. Note when they gesture a lot and when their hands go still. Then watch the same segment again with the sound on and check what they were saying at the moments of change.
2. **Count the steeples and the thumbs.** At your next meeting, or at a dinner with several people, look for who's steeppling and who keeps their thumbs in view. Ask yourself whether they match the people who, at that moment, feel most confident about the topic.
3. **Look for a withdrawal.** In any conversation, notice a moment when someone's arms come back close to their body or their hands go still. Write down the sentence that had just been said. Don't form any hypotheses; just collect the pairing.
4. **Watch crossed arms without judging.** Every time you see someone cross their arms, before you think "They're closed off," list at least three possible alternative reasons (cold, comfort, concentration...). Then look at the rest of the body to figure out which one is most likely.
5. **Experiment on yourself.** For an entire conversation, try keeping your hands still in your lap. Notice whether talking feels harder or whether the words come more slowly. It's a direct way to feel how much gestures help you think.

At the end of the week, pick the observation that surprised you most and write it down in three lines: what you saw, when, and what it might have meant.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Crossed arms have many meanings, often innocent (cold, comfort, concentration): what counts is how tightly they grip and when they appear.
- Arms that pull back close to the body, or go still, are a more reliable sign of discomfort than crossed arms.
- Steepling and visible thumbs usually indicate confidence; tightly interlaced fingers and hidden thumbs, less confidence.
- Illustrators help us think: when they suddenly disappear, the mind is working in a different way.
- Touch is powerful and depends on hierarchy, culture, and timing: someone who pulls away is giving you a clear answer.
- Be wary of gesture dictionaries: always ask yourself what changed in the hands, and after which sentence.

The Face and Microexpressions

Sunday dinner at the in-laws', in a small town outside the city. Richard, thirty-six, has just shared at the table the news that he and Rose have been waiting weeks to announce: they've bought a house. Not around the corner from her parents, as everyone expected, but in Seattle, clear across the country, where Richard has landed a job offer.

His mother-in-law, Ann, claps her hands. "What wonderful news! I'm so happy for you both!" She gets up, hugs her daughter, hugs her son-in-law. Everyone raises a glass.

But Richard saw something. He couldn't even describe it properly. In the instant he said "Seattle," before the applause, his mother-in-law's face did something. A flash. The corners of her mouth dropped for a moment, the inner ends of her eyebrows rose and drew together, her chin tightened. Then, right away, the smile. All of it in less time than it takes to tell.

For the rest of the meal, Ann smiles. But it's a smile that stays on her mouth and never reaches her cheeks, and it switches off abruptly the moment nobody is looking at her.

Richard doesn't need an expert to understand that his mother-in-law is sad. His brain got it before he had any words for it. This chapter is here to put a name to what you've always seen without knowing

it: facial expressions, the long ones and the ones that last a flash, and their limits.

Seven Emotions Written on the Face

The idea that some facial expressions are the same all over the world is an old one. Charles Darwin proposed it as early as 1872, in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. But for nearly a century, many scholars believed the opposite: that expressions were learned, different from culture to culture, like languages.

In the late 1960s, Paul Ekman set out to test it. In 1969, together with E. Richard Sorenson and Wallace Friesen, he showed photographs of faces to people in several countries, and they recognized the same emotions in very similar ways. But all of those people watched movies and read magazines: maybe they had learned from the same images. So in 1971, Ekman and Friesen published the results of a study among the Fore of Papua New Guinea, a people who at the time had had very little contact with the outside world. The researchers told them short stories (“Her child has died,” “He’s about to be attacked by a wild boar”) and asked them to choose the right face from a few photos. There too, recognition was largely similar to ours.

From these studies came the list of seven basic emotions (there were originally six; in 1986, Ekman and Friesen added contempt). In 1978, the two researchers also published the FACS (Facial Action Coding System), an atlas that catalogs every single movement of the facial muscles. Here are the seven emotions boiled down to the essentials, the way you’ll see them in everyday life.

Happiness. The corners of the mouth pull up and back. The cheeks lift. Around the eyes, those small fan-shaped creases we call crow’s feet appear. We’ll come back to this detail shortly, because it’s what separates a genuine smile from a polite one.

Sadness. This is the expression we saw on Richard’s mother-in-law. The corners of the mouth turn down. The chin tightens and puckers, sometimes with a slight quiver. The most telling sign is on the fore-

head: the inner ends of the eyebrows rise and draw together, almost like an upside-down tent. Ekman points out that very few people can make this movement on command: that's why, when you see it, the sadness is usually real.

Anger. The eyebrows lower and pull together, creating vertical lines between the eyes. The gaze turns fixed and hard. The lips press together and narrow, or open into a squared-off shape, as if to shout. According to Ekman, narrowing lips are among the first signs of anger on the rise, sometimes before the person even notices it.

Fear. The eyebrows rise and pull together at the same time, and the forehead wrinkles in the middle. The eyes open wide. The lips stretch horizontally toward the ears, tense. What sets it apart from surprise is precisely these two things: brows pulled together and a tense mouth.

Surprise. The eyebrows lift in a curve, the forehead fills with horizontal lines, the eyes open wide, the jaw drops, and the mouth falls open, relaxed. It's the briefest emotion of all: it lasts an instant and then turns into something else (joy, fear, anger). A "surprise" that stays on someone's face for a long time is often an act.

Disgust. The nose wrinkles, the upper lip rises, sometimes baring the upper teeth. It's the face we make when we open the fridge and smell fish that's gone bad. But the brain uses exactly the same muscles for moral disgust too: in the face of an indecent proposal, a shameless lie, or a person we can't stand.

Contempt. It's the only asymmetrical expression on the list: one corner of the mouth tightens and lifts on one side only, in a crooked half smile. It communicates superiority: "I'm above you." It's a signal to take seriously in relationships, because contempt, unlike anger, isn't trying to resolve anything: it looks down from above.

Lip Compression and the Wrinkled Nose

The seven full expressions show up when an emotion is strong. In everyday life, though, between an office meeting and a chat at the coffee

shop, you'll much more often see scaled-down signals: small movements in just one part of the face.

The first is disappearing lips. Joe Navarro, in *What Every BODY Is Saying* (2008), describes them this way: when we're under pressure, the lips press against each other until they almost vanish and become a thin line. Sometimes the corners turn down, forming an upside-down U. It's one of the most common and most useful signs of tension, because it often shows up at the exact moment something bothers us.

Picture Patricia, the head of the administrative office, listening to the new director announce a "reorganization of the shift schedule." She nods. But her lips have closed into a thin line, and they stay that way. She hasn't said a word, but she already has an objection to that plan.

The second is the wrinkled nose, even just slightly. It's the quick, light version of disgust. You see it when someone hears the name of a person they can't stand, tastes a wine they don't like, or reads a proposal they find ridiculous. It often lasts just an instant. Navarro considers it a very honest signal of dislike, because people rarely control it.

The third is the crooked half smile of contempt, which we've just seen. It's the flash on the mechanic's face when you try to tell them what's wrong with your car, or on the veteran coworker's face while the new hire suggests changing the way things are done. Keep an eye on it: it tells you not only that the other person disagrees, but that they don't consider you their equal.

Watch out for habits here too. Some people have a naturally asymmetrical mouth, some press their lips together when they concentrate, some wrinkle their nose because of an allergy. The four rules apply to the face just as they do to the rest of the body: always start from the baseline and look for the sudden change, not the fixed shape.

Microexpressions: The Flash That Slips Out

Let's go back to the flash on the face of Richard's mother-in-law. That kind of expression has a name: a microexpression.

The phenomenon was described in 1966 by Ernest Haggard and Kenneth Isaacs. They were studying films of psychotherapy sessions and noticed that, when they watched the footage in slow motion, extremely rapid expressions crossed the patients' faces, expressions nobody had noticed at normal speed. They called them "micromomentary" expressions.

Ekman and Friesen took up the idea in 1969, in a paper on nonverbal "leakage" and clues to deception. They analyzed the film of a patient hospitalized for depression who, during an interview, assured her doctors that she was feeling better and asked to be allowed to spend the weekend at home. Going over the film frame by frame, they found an expression of deep despair that crossed her face for a fraction of a second, immediately covered by a smile. The patient later admitted that she had been hiding from her doctors how bad she felt, and that during her leave she had been planning to harm herself. Ekman also tells this story in *Telling Lies* (1985).

What's the mechanism? When we feel a strong emotion and at the same time want to hide it, the face finds itself in the middle of a tug-of-war. On one side, the emotion pushes to come out; on the other, willpower tries to cover it up. Sometimes willpower arrives a few tenths of a second late, and the true emotion slips out for an instant before it's covered.

Ekman also talks about display rules: every culture and every family teaches when an emotion can be shown and when it can't. In a study Ekman described in 1972, Japanese and American students watched unpleasant films. When they were alone, their faces showed very similar expressions of disgust and fear. With a researcher in the room, the Japanese students more often masked their negative expressions with a smile. The emotions were the same; what changed was the rule about what to show.

This is the point to keep in mind: a microexpression doesn't tell you the person is lying. It tells you that, in that instant, they felt an emotion they then chose not to show. Richard's mother-in-law wasn't lying out of malice. She was doing what almost all of us do: setting her own pain

aside so she wouldn't spoil the celebration for her kids. And maybe she was also happy for them, truly, at the same time.

So how reliable are microexpressions? This is where honesty matters, because television has built a myth around them. In crime shows, the expert looks at a suspect, catches a flash of contempt, and solves the case. The reality of the research is more modest.

In 2008, Stephen Porter and Leanne ten Brinke asked volunteers to look at images that stirred up emotions and either react genuinely or fake a different emotion. Then they analyzed their faces frame by frame. They found that hidden emotions did sometimes "leak," especially when the person had to fake a different one. But full-fledged microexpressions were rare, often partial (only in the upper or only in the lower half of the face), and they also showed up in people who weren't faking anything.

Three practical conclusions.

First, microexpressions exist, but they aren't frequent. Don't expect to see one in every conversation.

Second, when you do catch one, it tells you which emotion is underneath, not why it's there. Fear can be fear of being found out, or fear of not being believed. Those are two very different things.

Third, they're there to raise a doubt, not to give you certainty. If you see a flash of sadness on a smiling face, don't think, "There it is, they're faking." Use that signal to ask a gentle question: "Everything okay? It looks like that got to you."

The Genuine Smile and the Polite One

Like Richard's mother-in-law, or the volunteers in the face studies, when we want to hide an uncomfortable emotion we almost always reach for the same mask: a smile. It's the expression we see most often, and it's also the easiest one to fake.

In the mid-1800s, the French neurologist Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne ran a series of experiments, stimulating his patients' facial muscles

with small electric shocks and photographing the results. In 1862 he published an observation that became famous: a smile produced by moving only the mouth looked fake. The smile of genuine joy also required the muscle that narrows the eyes, the one that lifts the cheeks and creates crow's feet, and which, in his view, doesn't move easily on command.

More than a century later, in 1990, Paul Ekman, Richard Davidson, and Wallace Friesen revived the idea and named it, in his honor, the Duchenne smile. They had volunteers watch pleasant films while recording both their facial expressions and their brain activity. Smiles that involved the eyes were linked to brain activity typical of positive emotions more than smiles made with the mouth alone.

So how do you spot a polite smile? A few clues:

1. **The mouth smiles, the eyes don't.** The cheeks don't rise, the creases at the corners of the eyes don't appear, the gaze stays the same.
2. **The timing is off.** A genuine smile arrives and fades gently. A polite one often appears all at once, stays frozen too long, and then shuts off abruptly, like a light switch.
3. **It's asymmetrical.** One side of the mouth goes up more than the other (be careful not to confuse it with contempt, which is a tenser, more crooked half smile).
4. **It comes at the wrong moment.** It shows up before the punchline, or too late, or while the rest of the face is saying something else.

But caution is needed here too. In 2009, Eva Krumbhuber and Antony Manstead showed that many people can produce a smile with creases around the eyes on command. Actors can do it, and so can plenty of salespeople. And a very broad smile, even a fake one, lifts the cheeks and creates creases that mimic those of a genuine smile.

And then there's the most important fact: a polite smile isn't a malicious lie. It's the glue of social life. We smile that way at the cashier, at

the neighbor in the elevator, at the customer who's wasting our time. If you see a "mouth-only" smile, you haven't uncovered a traitor. You've uncovered a polite person who, at that moment, isn't feeling any particular joy.

One last important note. In recent years, Ekman's model has been called into question: a major review by Lisa Feldman Barrett and colleagues (2019) showed that in real life we express emotions in far more varied ways than in lab photos, and that the same face can mean different things depending on the situation. This brings us straight back to this book's rules: never isolate a signal. The face is a valuable clue, but it only truly speaks together with the rest of the body, the words, and the context.

IN PRACTICE

Naomi's One-on-One

Naomi is forty-seven and has been running HR for a regional grocery chain for eight years. Today she has to tell Ryan, thirty-three, a department manager, that the promotion to store manager has gone to a coworker.

Ryan comes in and sits down. Naomi calmly explains the decision and the reasons behind it: the coworker has more years of experience in that role, but the company has a path in mind for Ryan too.

Ryan answers right away: "That's totally fine, of course. I completely understand." And he smiles.

Naomi, who has known him for years, knows how Ryan smiles when he's happy: his whole face moves, his eyes crinkle, he laughs with his shoulders too. This one, though, is a smile that shows up all at once and stays frozen, only on his mouth. His eyes aren't part of it.

But there was also something before the smile. The instant Naomi said the coworker's name, Ryan's lips pressed into a thin line, and one corner of his mouth pulled up on one side only. A split second, then the smile covered everything.

Naomi puts the pieces together. The smile is a polite one, and that's normal: nobody jumps for joy over a missed promotion. But that crooked half smile at the coworker's name tells her something specific. This isn't just disappointment. It's contempt, aimed squarely at him.

Naomi doesn't say, "I can see you don't think much of him." That would be an accusation based on a flash. Instead, she asks an open-ended question: "Ryan, I'd really like to hear how you think the two of you will work together from here on."

Ryan hesitates. He lowers his eyes and rubs the back of his neck. Then it all comes out: last year, that coworker took credit for one of Ryan's projects in front of upper management, and Ryan swallowed it without saying a word to anyone.

The conversation changes. Naomi takes notes, suggests a three-way meeting to clarify roles, and puts Ryan in charge of a project with his name on it. She hasn't read anyone's mind. She saw a hidden emotion and used that information to open a door, not to close it.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake in reading faces is confusing the emotion with its cause. You see fear and think, "They're scared because they're lying." You see anger and think, "They're angry at me." You see sadness and think, "I've hurt them."

But the face only tells you which emotion is there, and only with a certain probability. It never tells you why. Fear on the face of a kid being questioned by their parents may come from guilt, but also from the worry of not being believed, from fear of being punished for something else, or from embarrassment. Anger on a coworker's face may be about the phone call they just made, not about you.

There's a second mistake, tied to the first: believing you have an infallible eye. After reading a little about microexpressions, it's tempting to see them everywhere, and to trust blindly what you see. Research

says the opposite: real flashes are few, and our brain is very good at seeing what it expects to see.

How do you avoid both? Treat every expression as a hypothesis to test, not a conclusion. Always ask yourself: Which emotion did I see? At what exact moment? Are there other signals from the body pointing the same way? And then, if it matters, ask. One respectful question is worth more than a hundred hypotheses.

EXERCISE

To train your eye on faces, you need a week, a phone, and a bit of patience.

1. **Study the mirror.** In front of a mirror, try making the seven expressions one at a time, using the descriptions in this chapter as a guide. Notice which muscles you can move on command and which you can't (the inner eyebrows of sadness are almost always the hardest).
2. **Slow the videos down.** Pull up an interview on YouTube where a politician, a coach after a loss, or a celebrity answers an awkward question. Use the setting that cuts the playback speed in half and watch only the face at the moment the question ends: look for the first movement, before the answer starts.
3. **Collect smiles.** For three days, whenever someone smiles at you, ask yourself: Are the eyes involved? Does the smile arrive gently or all at once? Does it fade slowly or switch off suddenly? In the evening, try to recall at least three of each kind.
4. **Look for disappearing lips.** In a meeting or at a dinner, look for the moment when someone presses their lips together until they almost disappear. Note what had just been said.
5. **Turn an observation into a question.** Pick a situation where you see an emotion that doesn't match the words. Instead of drawing a conclusion, ask a gentle, open-ended question. Then note what you found out.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The seven basic emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt) have facial signs that are recognized across many cultures.
- Disappearing lips, a wrinkled nose, and a crooked half smile are small, frequent, and very useful signals.
- Microexpressions exist, but they're rare and often partial: they tell you which emotion is there, not why.
- A genuine smile involves the eyes too and has gentle timing, but it can be imitated: a polite smile is no crime.
- Always read the face together with the body, the words, and the context: the scientific debate on universality is still open.
- Every expression is a hypothesis to test with a question, never a verdict.

Eyes and Gaze

A used car lot on the edge of town, on a Thursday afternoon. Sabrina is twenty-seven, a nurse, and she's shopping for her first car. With her is her father, Victor, who knows his way around cars and doesn't put much trust in salesmen.

The salesman, Stan, is good. He's smooth, likable, and knows every detail of the gray Corolla Sabrina is looking at. At one point Victor asks: "Has it ever been in an accident?" Stan answers, "No, absolutely not," but as he says it, he looks down and off to the side, toward the hood.

Once they're off the lot, Victor is certain: "Did you see that? He looked down. He's lying. That car's been in a wreck." Sabrina isn't convinced. To her, Stan just seemed like someone trying to remember.

Who's right?

Victor thinks the way most people around the world do. In 2006, an international group of researchers (the Global Deception Research Team, led by Charles Bond) asked thousands of people in 58 countries how you can spot a liar. The most common answer, almost everywhere, was the same: "Liars look away." It's an almost universal belief. And, as we'll see, it's mostly wrong.

The eyes say a great deal, just not what we think. In this chapter we'll look at what they can really tell you: the pupils, the eyelids, the eyebrows, the gaze that slides away and the gaze that locks onto you. And we'll take apart a couple of myths that refuse to die.

Pupils Don't Take Orders

The pupils are the one part of the face that nobody can move at will. They widen and narrow on their own, driven by the autonomic nervous system.

The first thing that moves them, of course, is light: in dim light they widen to let more in, and in bright light they shrink. That alone is enough to make them hard to read in everyday life. But light isn't the only thing that matters.

In 1960, the psychologist Eckhard Hess and his colleague James Polt showed men and women a series of pictures while measuring their pupils. The pupils widened more in front of the pictures that interested them. A few years later, in 1965, Hess described another experiment that became famous: he showed a group of men two photos of the same woman, identical except for one detail, retouched by hand. In one of them, her pupils were larger. Most of the men found the woman with the large pupils more attractive, but almost none of them could say why.

There's a curiously Italian footnote to this. During the Renaissance, some Italian ladies put drops extracted from a plant into their eyes to dilate their pupils and look more beautiful. That plant is still called belladonna today, Italian for "beautiful lady."

Pupils don't widen only out of interest, though. In 1966, Daniel Kahneman and Jackson Beatty asked volunteers to hold longer and longer strings of numbers in their heads. The more numbers they had to remember, the wider their pupils got. When they repeated the sequence and "unloaded," their pupils went back to small. In other words, pupils also measure mental effort.

Hess had also suggested that pupils narrow when we see something we don't like, and Navarro, too, mentions sudden constriction as a possible reaction to unwelcome news. On this point, though, later evidence has been much weaker: better not to count on it.

So what good is all this in practice? Not much, to be honest. In real life the light changes constantly, distances are large, and many people

have dark eyes, so their pupils are hard to see. Up close and in steady light you can sometimes catch a sudden widening, but it stays a background signal, never one to use on its own. If large pupils make you think someone is interested in you, remember they can also mean “I’m doing a hard calculation” or “it’s dark in here.”

Eyelids and Eyebrows

Eyelids and eyebrows are much easier to observe than pupils. And they say quite a lot.

Blinking. We all blink constantly, each at our own rhythm. Navarro observes that under stress the rate tends to go up: people who are nervous, worried, or struggling blink more often. Think of certain politicians in an uncomfortable interview, their eyelids fluttering like a butterfly’s wings.

But there’s an interesting twist. In 2008, Sharon Leal and Aldert Vrij measured the blinking of people who had to lie or tell the truth about a task they had just done. During the lie, blinking tended to decrease, because the mind was focused and busy. Right afterward, once the lie was over, it increased, as if to catch up. So there’s no simple rule along the lines of “lots of blinking means lying.” We’ll take a careful look at lying in Chapter 10. For now, it’s enough to remember that blinking is an indicator of inner activity, not of guilt, and that it has to be compared with the person’s baseline.

Eyes that close and cover up. Navarro describes a behavior he calls “eye blocking.” When we hear or see something we don’t like, our eyes tend to protect themselves. The eyelids stay closed a little longer than usual. The person rubs their eyes, puts a hand in front of them, brings their fingers to their temples. Sometimes they close their eyes and shake their head at the same time, as if to say “I can’t believe this.”

It’s a very old behavior. Navarro points out that even children who have been blind since birth do it when they hear something they don’t like: there’s nothing to keep from seeing, and yet their eyes cover up anyway.

Picture a condo association meeting where the property manager announces an increase in the monthly fees. Mr. Ferris, in the second row, closes his eyes for a full second and brings his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. He hasn't said a word. But for him, that news is heavy.

Be careful, though: tiredness makes people close their eyes too, and people who are concentrating hard sometimes close them to think better. The difference is timing: eye blocking comes right after a specific piece of information.

Narrowing eyelids. Squinting eyes, with the lower lid rising and tightening, are another signal worth knowing. Sometimes they only mean the sun is too bright or someone forgot their glasses. But when they show up in the middle of a conversation, under lowered eyebrows, they often signal doubt, suspicion, or irritation. It's the face you make when the plumber rattles off a price for the replacement part, with nothing in writing.

The eyebrow flash. When you run into someone you know and you're happy to see them, your eyebrows lift for an instant. You do it without thinking. In 1972, the ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt described this gesture after filming it among very different peoples around the world, and he found it almost everywhere as a signal of greeting and recognition. It's a silent "I see you, good to see you."

Precisely because it's so automatic, its absence says something. If you walk into a room and someone you know well looks at you without an eyebrow flash, maybe they're just distracted. But if they flash it at everyone except you, that's a signal not to ignore.

So far we've looked at what happens around the eyes. Now let's get to the question we started with: where do the eyes go while we talk?

Looking and Not Looking

Let's go back to Stan, the salesman, and his eyes dropping toward the hood. Is looking away really a sign of lying?

The research answer is no, or at least not reliably. The major reviews of the cues to deception, such as the one by Bella DePaulo and colleagues in 2003, did not find gaze aversion to be a useful signal for telling liars from truth-tellers. And there's a simple reason: liars know perfectly well that everyone expects them to look away. So many of them do the opposite and look you straight in the eye.

So why do we look away? For plenty of more ordinary reasons.

To think. Looking at a face takes attention: a face is full of information to process. When we need to remember or reason something out, we move our eyes away to free up the mind. In 1998, Arthur Glenberg and colleagues found that people look away more often when questions are difficult, and that they remember better when they can look elsewhere or close their eyes. In 2005, Gwyneth Doherty-Sneddon and Fiona Phelps observed the same thing in children: the harder the question, the more they looked away. Stan, in all likelihood, was just searching his memory.

To manage the conversation. In 1967, the psychologist Adam Kendon studied gaze during conversations and noticed a distinct rhythm. The person who starts speaking tends to look away, especially at the beginning of a long sentence. The listener looks at the speaker more. When the speaker is about to finish, they look back at the other person, as if handing over the floor. So looking away is part of the normal traffic of conversation.

Out of shyness or respect. Some people find it hard to hold someone's gaze because of their temperament, because of social anxiety, because they're neurodivergent, or simply because that's what they're used to. For them, long eye contact is tiring, sometimes almost painful. Reading their lowered eyes as guilt would be unfair.

Because of culture. In many cultures, looking an older or higher-ranking person in the eye for long is considered rude. A 2013 study by Hironori Akechi and colleagues compared Japanese and Finnish people: the Japanese participants tended to perceive faces looking straight at them as angrier and less approachable than the Finnish participants did. If you work with coworkers or clients from different cultures, or if

you have neighbors who came from other countries, remember this before you judge a young person who lowers their eyes when you speak to them: they may be showing you respect.

Even without changing countries, context changes everything. Two friends at a coffee shop look at each other a lot; neighbors sharing the elevator stare at the floor numbers so they won't meet each other's eyes; a teenager being scolded looks at the floor almost by definition.

So what should you really watch? Changes. If someone has kept their eyes calmly on you for the whole conversation and suddenly, on one specific question, their eyes start to dart away, that's a change worth noting. Not proof. A spot to pay attention to.

The Gaze That Weighs on You

If the gaze that avoids you is overrated, the gaze that fixes on you is often underrated.

Looking someone in the eye is an extremely powerful gesture. It can mean interest, affection, attention. But eye contact that lasts too long, without a smile and without the normal pauses, becomes a challenge.

In 1972, Phoebe Ellsworth, Merrill Carlsmith, and Alexander Henson ran an experiment that was simple and brilliant. A researcher stood near a crosswalk and stared at drivers stopped at the red light. When the light turned green, the drivers who had been stared at pulled away faster, on average, than those who hadn't. Being stared at by a stranger makes us so uncomfortable that it pushes us to get away.

Gaze is also tied to power. In 1982, John Dovidio and Steve Ellyson studied what they called the "visual dominance ratio." In a conversation, people with more power tend to look at the other person as much while speaking as while listening. People with less power look much more while listening than while speaking. Observers watching the recorded conversations judged precisely the people with the first pattern to be more powerful.

You can see this clearly in everyday life. The boss who talks to you with a fixed stare and doesn't look away even while you're answer-

ing. The arrogant customer who looks down their nose at you while complaining. The father-in-law who sizes you up in silence at dinner when you say you want to change jobs. These looks aren't asking for information: they're asserting a position.

How do you tell an intense but friendly gaze from a gaze meant to crush you? Look at the rest of the face. A warm gaze comes with a soft face: relaxed or slightly raised eyebrows, cheeks lifting, the occasional smile, pauses. A challenging gaze comes with a still face: lowered eyebrows, tense eyelids, closed mouth, no pauses. And it usually comes with a body that moves closer or takes up more space.

One clarification: not everyone who stares wants to dominate. Some people simply have a very direct gaze out of habit or because of their job. Always go back to the baseline: do they look at the waiter and their coworkers that way too, or only at you when you disagree with them? We'll talk about how the gaze is used deliberately to intimidate in Chapter 14.

The Myth of Eyes Up and to the Right

There's one more legend to take apart, one of the most widespread in communication courses.

In the 1970s, the founders of NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) put forward an idea that became enormously popular: the direction in which a person moves their eyes would reveal how they're thinking. Looking up and to the left would mean recalling a real image; looking up and to the right would mean constructing a new one, in other words, making it up. From there it's a short step: if they look up and to the right while answering, they're lying.

It's an elegant idea, and easy to teach. Too bad it doesn't work.

In 2012, Richard Wiseman and colleagues put it to the test in three studies. In the first, they filmed people lying or telling the truth and analyzed their eye movements: no difference in the direction of their gaze. In the second, they taught one group the eye method and then asked them to tell lies from truths: the trained people were no better

than the untrained ones. In the third, they analyzed footage of real press conferences in which some people were publicly lying about a missing relative (it later emerged that they were involved): there too, the direction of the eyes said nothing.

The title of the paper was already an answer: "The Eyes Don't Have It." If someone teaches you to spot lies from the direction of a person's gaze, now you know they're selling a legend.

IN PRACTICE

Simon's Meeting

Simon is thirty-nine and runs logistics at a trucking company outside the city. Every Monday there's a meeting with the general manager, Mr. Conway, and the department heads. This morning's topic is a serious delay in last week's deliveries.

Mr. Conway asks who authorized the change to the Friday shifts. Silence.

Simon looks around at the others. Ellen, the warehouse manager, is staring the general manager straight in the eye, barely blinking. Tom, the youngest, looks at the table and scratches the back of his neck. Lucy, from the front office, raises her eyes to the ceiling and then off to the side, as if she's thinking.

Simon's first instinct is to look at Tom. But then he remembers the baseline: Tom always looks at the table when the general manager is talking. He's in his first year, he's shy, and Mr. Conway intimidates him. His lowered eyes haven't changed compared with other meetings.

Lucy is trying to remember something: her eyes move away, then come back, and she says, "I think the request came in by email Friday morning. I can check."

Ellen, on the other hand, isn't acting like herself. Usually, in meetings, she looks at the general manager, but with normal pauses: she looks, glances down at her papers, looks back. Not today. She's staring at him,

her face still. When Lucy mentions the email, Ellen closes her eyes for a beat longer than normal and brings her fingers to her temple. Then she goes back to staring at Mr. Conway.

Simon doesn't jump to conclusions. Ellen might feel wrongly accused and be reacting out of pride, or she might know something and be bracing to defend herself. But two things are certain: her gaze has changed from her baseline, and the eye blocking came exactly on the word "email."

After the meeting, Simon stops by the warehouse with two coffees. He doesn't ask Ellen anything about the delay. He just asks how Friday went. Ellen huffs and tells him: she authorized the change herself, because two drivers were out sick and there was no other option. But she sent the confirmation email to the wrong person, and nobody notified the customers. She's afraid of getting called out in front of everyone.

Simon suggests she explain it to the general manager herself, with the real reasons. The whole thing is wrapped up in ten minutes.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake with the eyes is exactly the one Victor made at the car lot: thinking that someone who doesn't look you in the eye has something to hide.

It's a dangerous mistake for two reasons. First, it makes you suspect innocent people, who look away because they're thinking, because they're shy, because they come from a different culture, because they feel embarrassed. Second, it makes you trust the wrong people. Professional manipulators know very well that direct eye contact inspires trust, and they use it. The con artist who looks you straight in the eye while telling you a made-up story is a classic precisely because they exploit this bias.

How do you avoid it? Stop asking yourself "Are they looking at me or not?" and start asking "Has the way they look at me changed? When?"

Gaze, like the rest of the body, has its own baseline. Some people make a lot of eye contact, others very little. The signal is the difference.

And if you really have an important doubt, remember what you learned in the earlier chapters: look for a cluster of signals. A gaze that changes, together with compressed lips, arms pulling in, and a torso turning away, is telling you something. A gaze that drops on its own almost always tells you only that the person is thinking.

EXERCISE

This week you'll train your eye on the eyes themselves. You'll need five days.

1. **Record the baselines.** Pick three people you see often. For each one, note how much eye contact they usually make: a lot, a little, in bursts. Also note whether they tend to look away when they're talking or when they're listening.
2. **Ask hard and easy questions.** In a relaxed conversation with a friend, alternate an easy question ("What did you have for lunch?") with one that takes calculation or memory ("What was the third job you ever had?"). Notice where their eyes go in each case: you'll see firsthand how much thinking moves the gaze.
3. **Look for eyebrow flashes.** For one whole day, every time you run into someone you know, notice whether their eyebrows lift for an instant. Notice your own, too. Who doesn't do it?
4. **Look for eye blocking.** In a meeting, at a dinner, or while watching a debate on TV, look for a moment when someone closes their eyes longer than usual or covers their eyes with a hand. Note what had just been said.
5. **Watch visual dominance.** At your next meeting with several people, notice who looks at the others even while talking and who looks mainly while listening. Compare what you see with the group's real pecking order.

At the end of the week, write one sentence about each of the five points. You'll find that gaze, read well, speaks mostly about attention, thought, and power dynamics, much more than about lies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Looking away isn't a reliable sign of lying: it often means the person is thinking, is shy, or is following a cultural rule.
- Pupils dilate with interest and mental effort, but light moves them far more: a signal to use with caution.
- Eye blocking (eyelids closed longer, hands over the eyes) often comes right after unwelcome news.
- The eyebrow flash is an almost universal greeting: its absence may tell you something.
- A fixed stare with no pauses can be used to dominate: people with more power look at others even while they're talking.
- NLP's eyes-up-and-to-the-right rule didn't hold up when researchers put it to the test (Wiseman and colleagues, 2012).

The Voice

Tuesday night, nine o'clock. The phone rings, and it's your sister Tina. "Everything okay?" you ask. "Yeah, yeah, everything's fine," she says. The words are the right ones. And yet something doesn't add up.

Her voice is higher than usual. She's talking fast, as if she wants to reach the end of the sentence before she trips. Before the second "yeah" there's a half laugh that doesn't belong there at all. Then a long pause, much too long for someone who usually buries you in chatter. She tells you about work, the kids, the weather, and meanwhile she clears her throat twice.

You can't see her. You don't know if her arms are crossed tight, if she's touching her neck, if she's looking out the window. All you have is the sound. But that sound is enough for you to ask her, after a while, "Tina, what's really going on?" And after another silence, she tells you that things have been rough with Phil lately.

The voice carries two messages at once: what we say and how we say it. The first one we control almost all the time. The second, much less. Breath, throat, rhythm, and speed are tied to the body and the emotions more than we like to admit.

In this chapter you'll learn to listen to that second message. Not to make wild guesses, but to catch what usually slips right past you: a tone that shifts, a pause in the wrong place, a silence that says more than a sentence.

The Two Tracks of the Voice

Think of every sentence as a song. There are the lyrics, and there's the music. Researchers call the music "paralanguage" (or prosody): everything that goes along with the words without being words. In practice it comes down to six things, easy to recognize even without a trained ear.

1. **Pitch**, meaning how high or low the voice is.
2. **Volume**, meaning how loud it is.
3. **Rhythm**, meaning the speed and regularity of speech.
4. **Pauses**, either filled ("um," "I mean") or empty.
5. **Timbre**, the "grain" of the voice: warm, tense, choked, cracking.
6. **Background noises**: little laughs, coughs, sighs, throat clearing.

Each of these six things changes when a person's inner state changes. The reason is physical. The voice is made of muscle and air: the vocal cords vibrate faster when they're tense, and tension shows up when stress does. Breathing gets shallow when the body gets ready to react. The mouth goes dry when we're agitated. These are the same ancient reactions you saw in Chapter 1, except that here you don't watch them: you listen to them.

The Swiss psychologist Klaus Scherer spent decades studying this link. In a 1996 study with Rainer Banse, he had professional actors perform nonsense sentences with fourteen different emotions, then measured their acoustic features and asked listeners to identify the emotions. The result: emotions can be recognized from the voice alone well above chance, even when the words mean nothing. Some emotions come through better than others: anger is easy to hear, disgust much less so.

So the voice is a real channel, not an illusion. To read it well, let's start with the three things that change first when the pressure rises.

Pitch, Volume, Rhythm: What Changes Under Pressure

Rising pitch. When a person is tense, scared, or excited, their voice tends to go up. It's the mechanical effect of tension on the vocal cords. You hear it in the coworker presenting the numbers to the boss who starts half a note higher than usual, in the young person at their first job interview, in the friend who tells you "I'm not mad" in a voice like a whistle. But remember the book's first rule: what counts is the change compared with that person's normal voice, not the voice itself. Some people have always had a high voice and aren't agitated in the least.

Volume. It goes in two directions. Some people raise their voice under pressure: anger and the urge to assert themselves push the air out. Others lower it until it nearly disappears: it's the audio version of freezing, the body trying to make itself small. If your coworker Kevin, who can usually be heard three offices away, answers a question in a thin little voice, you have a change worth paying attention to.

Rhythm. Here, too, there are two paths. Anxiety speeds things up: words pile on top of each other, sentences finish in a rush, like Tina's on the phone. But the effort of thinking slows things down: someone who has to build a difficult answer speaks more slowly, spells things out, stops. A rhythm that changes suddenly, at a specific point in the conversation, is one of the most useful signals in this whole chapter. It doesn't tell you what the other person is thinking. It tells you where to look.

Timbre. A "choked" or "cracking" voice is the throat tightening. It happens with strong emotion, with fear, with holding back tears. It's one of the hardest signals to fake or to hide, and also one of the clearest for the listener: we've all heard someone say "I'm fine" with their voice cracking halfway through.

A word of caution. Pitch, volume, and rhythm also depend on mundane things: fatigue, a cold, background noise, how used someone is to talking on the phone. A low voice at seven in the morning isn't a signal. It's a person who hasn't had their coffee yet.

Hidden Signals: Noises, Pauses, Rising Sentences

Nervous Laughs, Throat Clearing, Filled Pauses

Some signals go unnoticed almost all the time, because we treat them as noise rather than messages. In fact, they're among the most interesting.

The nervous laugh. The American psychologist Robert Provine studied laughter by observing hundreds of spontaneous conversations in public places. In a 1993 paper, and then in his 2000 book, he reported something that surprises almost everyone: most laughter doesn't come after a joke. It comes after perfectly ordinary lines, like "See you later" or "Yeah, I know." And speakers laugh more than listeners. Laughter, Provine says, is first and foremost a social signal: it's a way of saying "we're good," "it's nothing serious," "don't take it personally."

That's why a little laugh that pops up at a serious moment is worth listening to. When Veronica, on the phone with the bank, says, "Heh heh, no, I haven't made that payment yet," the laugh isn't a sign of amusement. It's there to soften her discomfort. It's the audio equivalent of the pacifying behaviors you saw in Chapter 1.

Clearing the throat. With anxiety, the throat goes dry and tightens. That dry little cough, that "ahem" before answering, is often the body bracing for an uncomfortable sentence. On its own it means nothing (maybe there really is a sore throat). But if, at dinner at your in-laws', the person sitting next to you clears their throat every time their mother asks about summer vacation, you have a clue.

Filled pauses. "Um," "I mean," "so," "you know." Many people see them as the flaws of someone who can't speak well. In a 2002 study, the psycholinguists Herbert Clark and Jean Fox Tree showed that they aren't noise: they're signals. Speakers use "uh" to warn the listener that a delay is coming, and the longer "um" announces a longer delay. In practice it's a way of saying: "Hold on, I'm looking for the words, don't interrupt me."

So filled pauses tell you where the person is struggling to build a sentence: out of embarrassment, or simply because the thought is com-

plex. The point isn't to count them. It's to notice whether they all bunch up around one particular topic.

Uptalk: The Voice That Rises at the End

There's a habit you'll hear constantly, especially from younger people: ending statements with the rising intonation of a question, what's known as uptalk. "So I'll bring dessert tomorrow? And I'll swing by your place around eight?" Those aren't real questions. They're statements that rise.

What can it mean? Often it's insecurity: the speaker is asking, without saying so, for reassurance. "Is this okay? Are you with me? Is everyone on board?" But careful, because this is where a lot of people slip up. For many people it's just a speech habit, tied to age, region, or circle of friends. A twenty-year-old who talks like that with everyone isn't insecure: they talk like their friends.

Here, too, the rule of change applies. If Vanessa, who usually ends her sentences crisply, starts making them rise when she walks you through the estimate, then there is a signal. She's asking for your permission without realizing it.

The opposite holds as well: a sentence that drops firmly at the end sounds like a period. And that brings us straight to another question: what does the voice of someone in charge sound like?

Voices That Command: Klostad and Pentland

Low Voices and Authority

Why do some voices sound more authoritative than others? Part of the answer lies in pitch.

In 2012, Casey Klostad, together with Rindy Anderson and Susan Peters, recorded men's and women's voices saying the same sentence: "I urge you to vote for me this November." Then they used a computer to alter each recording, creating a slightly lower and a slightly higher version of the same voice. They played the pairs to participants and asked:

which of the two would you vote for? Which one seems stronger, more competent, more trustworthy?

Most participants preferred the lower versions. And not just for male candidates: for female candidates too. The lower voices were chosen more often as leaders, and for women they were also judged stronger and more competent.

What does this study tell us? That a low pitch is associated, almost instinctively, with confidence and authority. What does it NOT tell us? That people with lower voices are actually more competent. The very deep voice of the salesperson at the dealership tells you nothing about the used car they're showing you. Knowing that a voice like that has an effect on you helps you separate the effect from the substance.

Keep another study in mind too: the one by Nalini Ambady and colleagues in 2002 on American surgeons. The researchers took brief recordings of surgeons talking with their patients and ran them through a filter that made the words unintelligible: all you could hear was the music of the voice. Listeners had to judge how dominant, warm, or anxious the tone was. The surgeons whose tone was rated more dominant and less caring were more often the ones who had already been sued for malpractice. Not because they were worse in the operating room, but because their tone affected their relationship with the patient.

A few seconds of voice without words are enough for us to form an idea of a person. And it's an idea that changes how we behave toward them.

Pentland's Honest Signals

Alex Pentland, an engineer and researcher at MIT, had an unusual idea. Instead of asking people what they thought, he had them wear small devices that recorded not their words, but the patterns of their voice and movement: how much they talked, at what pace, how much their pitch varied, how much they adjusted to the other person. He described the results in his 2008 book *Honest Signals*.

Pentland calls these patterns “honest signals,” because they’re very hard to control consciously over an entire conversation. He identifies four.

1. **Influence:** how much one person gets the other to follow their speaking rhythm. Whoever leads the conversation sets the tempo.
2. **Mirroring:** how much the two people imitate each other, in short expressions like “yeah,” “sure,” “right,” and in their rhythms.
3. **Activity:** how much a person talks and moves. More activity usually means more interest and more engagement.
4. **Consistency:** how even and fluid the speech is, without jerks and starts. A consistent voice suggests confidence and competence; a halting voice suggests uncertainty.

Without listening to a single word, Pentland’s group used these signals to predict the outcome of real situations: salary negotiations, blind dates, project pitches to potential investors. And they got it right far more often than people who judged only the words.

In everyday life, this translates into three habits. In meetings, listen for who sets the pace: the person who makes others slow down or speed up often matters more than the person who talks the most. In a one-on-one conversation, notice whether the rhythms are moving closer together (a good sign) or drifting apart (a bad one). And listen for regularity: someone who talks smoothly about the weekend and haltingly about work is giving you information.

When You Can’t See: The Phone and Silence

On the Phone

Let’s go back to Tina. How could you tell on the phone that something was wrong? You didn’t have her face, you didn’t have her hands, you didn’t have her feet.

The answer may surprise you. In 2017, the psychologist Michael Kraus published a series of experiments on a specific question: do we understand other people’s emotions better by watching them or just by

listening to them? In some conditions people could see and hear; in others they could only hear. The result: people who listened to the voice alone recognized the other person's emotions more accurately than those who could also see them.

Kraus's explanation: when you only listen, all your attention goes to the sound, and the voice carries far more information than we think. When you also have images, the eye steals the show and the details of the sound fade into the background.

That doesn't mean you understand everything on the phone. It means you're not missing the essentials. Here's what to listen for when you can't see:

Response speed. On the phone, pauses weigh twice as much, because there's nothing else to fill them. A "yes" that comes right away and a "yes" that comes after two seconds are two different answers.

The smile. You can hear it. In a 1980 study, the American researcher Vivien Tartter showed that listeners can tell when a person is smiling while they talk, even without seeing them: a smile changes the shape of the mouth, and so it changes the sound. That's why a "good morning" said with a long face sounds different.

And voice messages? Same rules, with one limit: you can re-record a voice message ten times, so it's less spontaneous.

Silence as a Signal

The last tool is the one almost everyone ignores: silence.

Most of us, on average, don't handle pauses in a conversation well. When silence falls, someone rushes to fill it. That's exactly why silence is a strong signal: whoever lets it last is doing something.

There are at least four kinds of silence, and learning to tell them apart changes a lot.

The silence that thinks. The gaze drifts, the face is relaxed, then a considered answer arrives. It's the silence of someone taking the question

seriously. Don't interrupt it. If you fill it yourself, you take away the other person's room to say the most interesting thing.

The silence that closes off. It comes after a specific question, the body stiffens, the person looks away, the answer is short. Something has touched a sore spot. You don't know why yet: it could be embarrassment, pain, anger, or something they don't want to say.

The silence that punishes. This is silence used as a weapon: not answering messages, sulking through dinner, replying in monosyllables for days. Here the silence isn't an emotion slipping out; it's a choice. We cover it in the companion book, *Emotional Control*, where you'll learn not to let the people who use it call the shots.

The silence that waits. This is the silence of someone who has made an offer and goes quiet, waiting for you to make a move. Negotiators know it well: the salesperson who tells you the price and then says nothing more. Whoever speaks first, in that moment, often gives something up. Knowing this lets you sit through those three seconds of emptiness: if you're selling, you don't rush to offer a discount nobody asked for; if you're buying, you don't jump at the deal just to escape the awkwardness.

Silence, like every signal in this book, has to be read in context. Some people are of few words by nature, there are cultures where a pause is a sign of respect, and there are families where people barely talk at the table. The silence of your father-in-law, who never talks, isn't the silence of your daughter, who usually can't keep quiet for a minute.

The Mortgage Call

Greg is forty-one, works in an office downtown, and is house hunting with his partner. He has found a condo he likes, and he calls the listing agent, Hector, to find out whether the owner would accept a lower offer.

For the first few minutes, Hector's voice is easy, warm, a little fast, like someone who makes this call ten times a day. That's his baseline. Greg takes note of it without overthinking: brisk pace, medium pitch, a few jokes.

Then Greg asks: "So, how long has the place been on the market?" The answer comes after a small pause, longer than the others. "Well, uh... um, a while, let's say. A few months." The pace has slowed, two filled pauses show up back to back, and the answer is vague. It's a change, and it comes right after a specific question.

Greg goes on: "And have there been other offers?" "Oh yes, yes, there's a lot of interest," Hector answers, but with a half laugh and his voice going up. A little laugh at a moment with nothing funny about it, a higher pitch, a vague statement. Three signals together, all at the same point.

Greg doesn't conclude that Hector is lying. He could be embarrassed because the owner is stubborn, or because his boss told him not to give out information. But Greg has a clear indication: there's discomfort around these two topics. And usually, when an agent is uncomfortable with "how long," it means the answer is "a long time."

So he does something simple: he stays quiet. He lets the silence stretch out two, three seconds. Hector fills it on his own: "I mean, look, the owner's open to a conversation, you know. They want to sell before the end of the year."

Greg found out what he needed without any interrogation: he listened to the music under the words, noticed where it went off-key, and used

silence at the right moment. The next day he makes an offer 10 percent lower, and the owner sits down to negotiate.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most widespread mistake is giving a signal a fixed meaning. “They laughed, so they were nervous.” “They have a deep voice, so they’re confident.” “They paused, so they were making it up.”

The voice is more misleading than the body for a specific reason: it depends on lots of things that have nothing to do with emotions. A cold, fatigue, an accent, temperament, a bad phone connection, a child screaming in the background on the other end. That’s why, before you read a vocal signal, you should listen to that person’s normal voice. A few minutes of neutral small talk is enough, as you learned in Chapter 2.

The second mistake, related to the first, is confusing the voice of someone who feels uncomfortable with the voice of someone who’s lying. A trembling voice can be fear of not being believed, shyness, emotion about a painful subject. In Chapter 10 you’ll see why mixing these up is so dangerous.

The third mistake is letting the music convince you instead of the content. The deep, steady voice of a salesperson or a politician puts you at ease, and Klofstad’s study explains why. But a confident voice doesn’t make what it says true. When you hear a voice you really like, remember to check the facts twice as carefully.

EXERCISE

This exercise takes a week, and you'll do almost all of it on the phone, the best place to train your ear.

1. **Choose three people** you often talk to on the phone: a family member, a friend, a coworker. For the first two days, just listen to their normal voice. Take notes, even mental ones: is it high or low? Fast or slow? Do they laugh often? Do they use a lot of filled pauses?
2. **From day three on, look for changes.** During each call, note the moment the voice changes: it rises, speeds up, fades out, a little laugh or a cough shows up. Don't interpret yet. Just note the topic you were talking about.
3. **The silence game.** At least once a day, after the other person finishes a sentence, wait two extra seconds before answering. Notice what happens: does the other person add something? Change their tone? Apologize?
4. **Listen for a smile.** When someone calls you, try to tell from their voice alone whether they're smiling. If you can, ask ("You sound like you're in a good mood. Did something happen?") and check.
5. **At the end of the week,** reread your notes. Are there topics where someone's voice always changes? That's a topic that weighs on that person. You don't need to know why: it's enough to know it's there.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The voice carries two messages: the words, which we control, and the music (pitch, volume, rhythm, pauses), which we control much less.
- Under stress the voice usually rises, the rhythm changes, and little laughs, coughs, and filled pauses show up: what counts is the change from that person's normal voice.
- Lower voices are perceived as more authoritative (Klofs-tad, 2012), but a confident voice doesn't make what it says true.
- Pentland's honest signals (influence, mirroring, activity, consistency) tell you who's leading and whether the conversation is working.
- On the phone you already have a lot to go on: listening to the voice alone, people often pick up emotions better (Kraus, 2017).
- Silence is a signal: learn to tell apart the silence that thinks, the one that closes off, the one that punishes, and the one that waits.

Distance and Territory

The 7:40 commuter train out of downtown. The car is almost empty. You sit by the window, set your bag on the seat next to you, and open your phone. You've got forty minutes of peace ahead of you.

A man in his sixties gets on: windbreaker, newspaper tucked under his arm. There are thirty empty seats. He sits down directly across from you. His knees are a hand's width from yours.

He hasn't done anything wrong. He hasn't looked at you, hasn't said a word. And yet something inside you goes on alert. You shift your legs to the side. You pull your bag a little closer. You raise your phone in front of your face, like a screen. Two stops later you realize you're thinking about changing seats, and you feel a little ashamed of the thought.

What happened? A stranger walked into a space you feel is yours, for no reason. A crowded car would have given you an explanation, and you wouldn't have given it a second thought. An empty car doesn't. And your body reacted before your mind had time to say, "Oh, come on."

We all carry around a kind of invisible bubble. And we all have places we consider ours: the desk, our chair at the table, the car, our side of the bed. Nobody taught us this, yet we defend them with precision. In this chapter you'll learn to see these bubbles and these territories, your own and other people's. They'll tell you a lot about what a person is

feeling, how comfortable they are in a given setting, and who's really in charge in a room.

Hall's Four Bubbles

The first person to measure this phenomenon methodically was the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall. In his 1966 book *The Hidden Dimension*, he gave the study of how we use space a name: proxemics. And he described four distances, based mainly on observing middle-class American adults. The measurements are approximate, but the idea still holds up.

1. **Intimate distance**, from zero to about 18 inches (45 cm). This is the space of hugs, of children held in our arms, of whispered secrets. We only let in people who are very close to us: partners, children, parents, close friends.
2. **Personal distance**, from about 18 inches to 4 feet (just over a meter). This is the distance of conversations between friends and acquaintances, the one you keep with a coworker at a coffee shop.
3. **Social distance**, from 4 feet to about 12 feet (about three and a half meters). This is the distance of formal encounters: the customer at the counter, the clerk at the window, the job interview with a desk in between.
4. **Public distance**, beyond 12 feet. This is the distance of someone speaking to a group: the teacher in the classroom, the speaker at a conference, the mayor at the podium.

The interesting part isn't the numbers. It's what happens when the distance doesn't match the relationship. If an acquaintance steps into your intimate zone, your body protests, just like on the train. If a close friend talks to you from social distance, you feel a chill. The "wrong" distance, in either direction, sends a message.

But what exactly do we do when someone enters the wrong bubble? In the 1960s, Nancy Felipe and Robert Sommer ran a simple and slightly cruel experiment. In a university library, a researcher would sit down

next to a female student who was reading alone, much closer than normal, even though there were plenty of empty seats. The study, published in 1966, showed that the “invaded” people left their seats much sooner than those who were left alone. Before leaving, though, they did a series of small things: they turned sideways, put a book or an elbow in the way as a barrier, slid a few inches away on their chair. The same things you did on the train.

Here’s the practical point. When people don’t like a distance, they rarely say so. They show it. And what you see is a predictable sequence:

- small adjustments in position (a step back, a chair moved);
- the body turning sideways (you saw this in Chapter 4);
- objects placed in between: a bag, a glass, a phone, a folder;
- the eyes moving elsewhere;
- and finally, the exit.

Let’s stop for a moment on that wandering gaze. In 1965, the British psychologists Michael Argyle and Janet Dean proposed equilibrium theory. The idea is this: in every relationship there’s a level of intimacy that feels right to us, and we regulate it with several tools at once. If the distance gets too short, we compensate with less eye contact, fewer smiles, a torso turned away. Think of an elevator: strangers a foot apart, and everyone staring at the floor numbers. It isn’t rudeness. It’s the way the body restores the balance.

The same mechanism also helps you read the opposite. When someone closes the distance and, at the same time, looks at you more and turns their torso toward you, they’re not compensating: they’re really moving closer. It’s a sign of interest, and you’ll meet it again in Chapter 11.

Contact Cultures: Close, but Not All Alike

Hall was observing Americans. And bubbles aren’t the same everywhere.

Researchers in proxemics have placed the Mediterranean countries among the so-called contact cultures. In a 1970 study of students from different countries, the anthropologist O. Michael Watson compared distance, gaze, and touch: those who came from the Arab world, Latin America, and Southern Europe stood closer, touched more, and looked at each other more than those who came from Northern Europe, Asia, or the United States.

Much more recently, in 2017, a team led by Agnieszka Sorokowska asked nearly nine thousand people in 42 countries what the right distance was for talking to a stranger, an acquaintance, and someone close to them. The differences between countries turned out to be large: what's normal in one place feels intrusive in another or, on the contrary, cold.

Italy is a good example of a contact culture. Even within a single country, though, habits change from place to place. Whether you compare Southern and Northern Europe, or a lively neighborhood block party with a quiet suburban street in the United States, people often notice differences at markets, in coffee shops, and at big family dinners. Still, there are few solid measurements confirming it region by region, so take stereotypes for what they are: widespread impressions, not hard data.

What always matters, though, and what you can check for yourself, are the differences between individuals:

- **The relationship.** The closer two people are, the smaller the bubble.
- **Personality.** Some people hug everyone; others stiffen if you put a hand on their shoulder.
- **The home they grew up in.** Someone from a big family in a small house often tolerates closeness better than someone who grew up with lots of room.
- **The city.** Someone who rides the subway at rush hour in a big city has learned to “switch off” their reaction to crowds. The same isn't true in a small mountain town.

- **Their state in the moment.** Someone who is angry, tired, or scared needs more space than usual.

That's why, with distance too, two rules you already know apply: the baseline and change. A loud, affectionate relative who talks to you from a foot and a half away and holds your arm isn't invading anything: that's the distance they keep with everyone. But if a coworker who usually stays five feet away suddenly moves in, or takes a step back the moment you hit a certain nerve, it's the departure from their habit that's talking to you.

Territories: The Desk, the Car, the Home

Your bubble moves with you. A territory, on the other hand, stays put: it's a place you consider yours and defend even when you're not there.

In 1975, the psychologist Irwin Altman distinguished three types of territory, and the distinction is useful in everyday life too.

Primary territories are places that are yours in a stable way, and everyone recognizes it: your home, your bedroom, your car. Here, intrusion carries enormous weight. Walking into someone else's home uninvited, opening their fridge, sitting on their bed: these are gestures that say "I belong here too," and they're accepted only from people who really have that kind of closeness.

Secondary territories are semipublic, but they "belong" to someone by habit: your desk at the office, the table at the coffee shop where you go every morning, the park bench where the same older ladies always sit, your usual pew at church. Nobody owns them. And yet, if a stranger takes one, whoever considers it theirs experiences it as a slight.

Public territories belong to everyone for a short time: a seat on the train, your spot on the beach, a table in the library. Here, possession lasts as long as you're there, or as long as you leave a marker.

In 1969, Robert Sommer and Franklin Becker put exactly these markers to the test. In a library, they left "place holders" on a table: a stack

of magazines, a book, a jacket on the chair. Personal markers, like the jacket, kept other people away much longer than an empty table did. It works the same way in everyday life: the towel on the pool lounge at seven in the morning, the coat on the movie theater seat, the wet umbrella on the café chair, the bag on the train seat. They're little flags. And if someone moves them or ignores them and sits down anyway, they're not just looking for a seat: they're telling you they don't recognize that boundary.

The car is a special case, because it's both territory and armor. In 1997, Barry Ruback and Daniel Juieng observed hundreds of cars in a shopping mall parking lot. They found that drivers leaving a space took longer to pull out when another car was waiting to take it. And they took even longer if the other driver honked. In practice, they were defending a spot they were already giving up. You've seen it yourself in any crowded parking lot, where an open space is worth about as much as prime real estate.

What do territories tell you about people? Three things.

First, **how they feel in a place**. Someone who sits down, puts their things down, and adjusts the chair feels at home. Someone who stays standing by the door with their jacket on doesn't. It's the "spatial" version of the comfort and discomfort we've been talking about since Chapter 1.

Second, **how much they trust you**. Do they let you into their car with muddy shoes? Do they let you sit on the "good" couch? Do they let you use their desk? Every permission granted on a territory is a small act of trust.

Third, **who's in charge**. Whoever is in charge usually has more space, uses it freely, and can enter other people's territory without asking. The executive who leans on your desk while talking to you, picks up your pen, walks into your office without knocking, is doing the same thing as the man on the train. Sometimes without malice, out of a habit that comes with the role. Sometimes not.

Where People Sit, and What It Says

Within a territory, whether it's a conference room, a café, or a dining room, there's an even finer choice: which chair you take.

In 1961, Fred Strodbeck and L. Harmon Hook studied American juries, which met around a rectangular table to deliberate. They noticed two things. First: whoever sat at the head of the table was chosen as foreperson more often. Second: people with more prestigious jobs tended to take the head of the table on their own. The seat reflected status and, at the same time, reinforced it.

It's the boss's chair, and you know it well. In a meeting, whoever sits at the head of the table or in the middle of the long side, where everyone can see them, usually wants to lead or is used to doing so. And if the real boss comes in late and that chair is already taken by someone else, watch what happens: the shuffle, the joke, the silence. They say a lot about the relationships in the group.

Robert Sommer, whom we've already met, also studied how we choose a seat depending on what we have to do. In his work in the 1960s, he found fairly consistent patterns:

1. **To chat**, people usually choose to sit kitty-corner (on either side of one corner of the table) or across from each other at a short distance.
2. **To cooperate** on a task, they prefer to sit side by side.
3. **To compete**, they sit across from each other, with the table in between.
4. **To work on their own**, they choose seats far apart, often at opposite corners.

This gives you a key for reading situations. A coworker who, in a negotiation, sits across from you with the table in between is setting up, perhaps without knowing it, a confrontation. One who turns their chair and sits beside you to look at the same sheet of paper is setting up a collaboration. On a first date, the corner seat is often more intimate than the one across the table.

The same goes for the family table, where the seats are a map of roles. There's Grandpa's chair, which nobody takes even after Grandpa is gone. There's the seat of whoever keeps getting up to serve, almost always the one closest to the kitchen. There's the cousins' table at weddings. And there's the chair that becomes a message: the son who, after a fight, sits at the opposite end of the table from his father, or the sister-in-law who, at Christmas, sits as far as possible from her mother-in-law.

An important caveat. The seat only counts if there was a choice. If there was only one chair left in the conference room, or if the hostess decides where everyone sits, you're not reading the person: you're reading the room, or whoever made the seating plan. That's the book's third rule: context.

When Space Becomes Pressure

There's one use of space that deserves a mention here, even though we'll cover it fully in Chapter 14: getting too close in order to put someone under pressure.

You know it. The salesperson who takes a step toward you while you hesitate. The angry neighbor at the condo association meeting who gets up and comes over to talk, standing right next to your chair. The boss who, instead of calling you in, comes to your desk and stands over you while you're still sitting. In all these cases, space doesn't just communicate closeness: it communicates "you have no way out."

Here we care about only one thing: how to recognize it, both when it's happening to you and when you see it done to someone else. There are three signals, almost always together. The distance shrinks right at the moment of a request or a disagreement, not during small talk. The other person positions themselves higher (standing while you stay in your chair, on a step, perched on the desk). And the ways out shrink: the door behind them, the narrow hallway, the car.

When you see these three signals together, you don't need to know whether the other person is doing it on purpose. It's enough to know

that your discomfort has a real cause. And that restoring the right distance, by taking a step back, standing up, or moving the conversation somewhere else, is your right. We'll look at the other countermoves in Chapter 14. If, at home or at work, this pressure turns into fear or threats, it's no longer a matter of proxemics: get help, including from the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233), free and open around the clock.

IN PRACTICE

Sunday Dinner

Brooke, 29, is bringing her boyfriend, Leo, to Sunday dinner at her parents' house for the first time, and the dining table has been extended for the occasion. Leo knows it's a small test for everyone, and he decides to use the first half hour to observe how people use space. Not to judge: to understand the unwritten rules of the house he's walking into.

At the door, Brooke's mother, Angela, hugs him right away, with a kiss on the cheek and a hand on his arm that stays there for a few seconds. Her father, Scott, shakes his hand with his arm fully extended, keeping a full personal distance. Leo makes a mental note: two very different bubbles. But he doesn't draw any conclusions. First he needs to see how they behave with everyone else.

Over the next half hour, he discovers that Angela hugs everyone, even the kid from the bakery who drops off dessert. Scott, on the other hand, shakes hands at arm's length even with his own brother. That's each person's baseline. Her father's distance isn't coldness toward Leo: it's just his way.

At the table, Angela decides who sits where. Scott sits at the head of the table, as he does every Sunday. Leo is placed at the other end. Brooke smiles and whispers to him: "That's where the important guests sit." Leo realizes that he and Brooke's father are at the two ends of the table, facing each other, in full view of everyone. It isn't hostility, but

it isn't an accident either: it's the seat of honor, and at the same time the seat under scrutiny.

During dinner he notices something else. Brooke's sister, Christina, has sat down at a corner next to Grandma, and the two of them talk nonstop the whole time. Uncle Marty, on the other hand, has pushed his chair slightly back from the table and holds his glass in front of him like a shield. When Scott talks politics, the uncle pulls back another inch or two. Leo doesn't know what happened between them, but he understands that politics is a topic to avoid.

Over coffee, the most interesting thing happens. Scott gets up, picks up his chair, and carries it over next to Leo's, right beside him, to show him some photos on his phone. From opposite ends of the table, they've moved to side by side.

Leo doesn't need anyone to tell him. He's passed the test, at least for today.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake is assuming your own bubble is the right size for everyone. People who need a lot of space judge anyone who stands closer as "pushy." People who like closeness judge anyone who keeps their distance as "cold." Either way, you're reading yourself, not the other person.

This mistake causes constant misunderstandings. The new coworker who talks to you from a foot and a half away by the coffee machine isn't necessarily pushy, or hitting on you. A mother-in-law who greets you without a hug doesn't have it in for you. A customer who stays a step back from the counter isn't necessarily suspicious. Before you read a distance as a message aimed at you, look at how that person handles distance with everyone else.

There's also the opposite mistake: ignoring the signs of discomfort you're causing. If, while you're talking, the other person takes a step

back, turns sideways, or puts an object between you, don't follow them. Stop, or ease back half a step. It's the simplest and most respectful way to put someone at ease, and the conversation often changes right away.

EXERCISE

One week to become aware of bubbles and territories, yours and other people's.

1. **Measure your bubble.** Ask someone you trust to start about thirteen feet away from you and walk slowly toward you while you stand still. Say "stop" the moment your body feels the urge to take half a step back. Then do it again in silence, looking each other in the eye. You'll notice right away how eye contact changes the distance.
2. **Watch the lines.** At the post office, at the pharmacy, at the grocery store, notice how far apart people stand in line. What happens when someone gets too close to the person in front of them?
3. **Map the territories at work or at home.** Make a list of the places that "belong" to someone even though it isn't written down anywhere: the chair, the mug, the seat in the conference room, the side of the couch.
4. **Read a meeting or a dinner.** Note who sits where, whether there was a choice, who sits at a corner, who sits across from whom, who takes the head of the table. Afterward, compare it with what happened in the conversation.
5. **Try switching seats.** Once, tactfully, sit somewhere other than your usual spot (at the table, at the coffee shop, in a meeting). Watch the reactions: jokes, looks, small shifts. They'll tell you how strongly people felt about that territory.
6. **Listen to your discomfort.** Every time you feel uncomfortable near someone, ask yourself: is it the distance, the height, the blocked exit, or the moment? Learning to name the cause helps you react more calmly.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We all have four bubbles (intimate, personal, social, public, Hall 1966): what matters is when the distance doesn't match the relationship.
- When people don't like a distance, they show it: they turn away, put objects in between, look elsewhere, leave (Felipe and Sommer 1966; Argyle and Dean 1965).
- Bubbles vary between countries (Sorokowska and colleagues 2017) and, above all, between individuals: always start from the baseline.
- Territories, whether primary, secondary, or public (Altman 1975), show how a person feels, how much they trust you, and who's in charge.
- The seat someone chooses reveals their role (Strodtbeck and Hook 1961) and the kind of encounter, but only if there was a choice.
- Distance that shrinks at the moment of a request, a higher position, and a blocked exit, all together, add up to pressure: you have the right to make space again.

The Signals of a Lie

Sunday morning, the kitchen, coffee brewing on the stove. Deborah watches her son Eddie, seventeen, shuffle in wearing pajamas, his hair sticking up in every direction.

“Where were you last night?”

“At Jake’s. We were studying for the history test.”

“Until one in the morning?”

“Yes, Mom. There was a lot to cover. Then we watched a show.”

Deborah studies him. Eddie opens the fridge and sticks his head inside. He doesn’t look her in the face. He scratches his neck. He answers quickly, in short sentences. She feels a certainty rising inside her: he’s lying. She can see it. She read somewhere that liars avoid eye contact and touch their face and neck. There he is: the liar.

But let’s stop for a moment. Eddie is a seventeen-year-old on a Sunday morning who has just rolled out of bed. He avoids his mother’s eyes even when he asks her if there’s any milk. He scratches his neck because he slept badly. He answers in one-word grunts because at nine on a Sunday morning that’s how he answers everyone. And maybe he simply feels like he’s under the microscope, and it annoys him.

Maybe he’s lying. Maybe he isn’t. The point is that none of the signals Deborah saw proves it. And if she accuses him based on those, she risks two things: punishing a son who was telling the truth or, if he really was lying, simply teaching him to look her in the eye next time.

This is the most anticipated chapter in the book, and probably the most disappointing for anyone looking for a surefire trick. Because there is no surefire trick. There is, however, an approach that's far better than the one almost everyone uses. It's less spectacular, but it works better.

There Is No Pinocchio's Nose

You know the starting point from the Introduction: in the large meta-analysis by Charles Bond and Bella DePaulo (2006), people spot lies only slightly better than chance, at about 54 percent. Here we'll look inside those numbers, because they hide details that change the way you think about all this.

First: the study pools the judgments of more than twenty thousand people, and not just ordinary people. Many professionals (police officers, judges, recruiters) do about the same. No profession comes with a built-in lie radar.

Second: people did a little better when they could hear the speaker, and worse when they could only watch them in a silent video. That fits with what you read in Chapter 8: the voice carries information that the face, which is more controlled, keeps hidden.

The third comes from a later paper by the same authors, published in 2008. The differences between judges are tiny: almost nobody is much better than anyone else. The big differences lie with the speakers. Some people seem honest even when they're lying, and some seem guilty even when they're telling the truth, simply because of the way they are. When we decide whether to believe someone, we're often judging their face, not their story.

Then there's a fourth detail, perhaps the most interesting. In the 2006 meta-analysis, people recognized truths better than lies. The reason is that, by default, we tend to believe whoever is in front of us. In 2014, the psychologist Timothy Levine built his "truth-default theory" on this idea: we believe other people until something forces us to doubt them. It isn't naivety. It's the reason social life works: if we doubted everything, we couldn't even buy a loaf of bread.

Why are we so bad at this? Because we look for the wrong signals. You saw it in Chapter 7: when the Global Deception Research Team asked people in 58 countries how you can spot a liar, the most common answer was shifty eyes. And that's precisely one of the cues the research doesn't confirm.

A few years earlier, in 2003, Bella DePaulo and her colleagues had published the most extensive review ever done on the cues to deception: more than 150 possible cues, examined across more than a hundred studies. For anyone hoping for a reliable checklist, the result was a cold shower. Most of the famous signals (squirming in the chair, touching the face, looking down) had no link to lying, or only a very weak one.

In fact, some work the opposite way from what we expect. You got a taste of this in Chapter 5: in the studies compiled by Aldert Vrij, one of the world's leading experts on the subject, people who lie often tend to move their hands and fingers less, not more. Why? Because they're concentrating, keeping themselves in check, trying to look believable. And people who keep themselves in check stay still.

And what about microexpressions, those flashes of emotion you saw in Chapter 6? They can betray a hidden emotion, but they don't tell you what's causing it. Stephen Porter and Leanne ten Brinke, who looked for them in 2008 in people faking emotions, found them rare, partial, and present in people who were being genuine as well.

So there's no "lie gesture." Pinocchio's nose exists only in fairy tales. In real life, the body doesn't tell you "they're lying": it tells you "there's tension here."

What to Watch Instead

If there's no lie gesture, what's left? Discomfort is left, and so are inconsistencies. They don't prove a lie: they tell you where to ask your next question.

Here are the signals that make the most sense, in light of everything you've read so far.

1. A change after a specific question. This is the most useful signal, and you already know it: it's the book's fourth rule. Someone is talking calmly, at their baseline. Then a specific question comes ("Where were you at ten?") and the picture changes: the voice rises or stops, the feet turn away, the torso pulls back, the hands disappear, a pacifying behavior shows up. Some researchers call these moments "hot spots." They don't tell you the person is lying. They tell you that question touched something.

2. Mismatches between words and body. Someone says "I'm thrilled" with slumped shoulders and a flat voice. They say "Absolutely, yes" while slightly shaking their head. They say "I couldn't care less" and press their lips together. Ekman also describes the small gestures that slip out involuntarily, like a half shrug while asserting something confidently: the body saying "who knows?" while the mouth says "of course." Once again, it isn't proof. It's a crack.

3. Answers that are too rehearsed. The truth often comes out a little messy: with pauses, corrections, pointless details, "wait, no, it was Tuesday." In DePaulo's 2003 review, liars' accounts were, on average, less rich in detail and had fewer of these small imperfections: fewer spontaneous corrections, and fewer admissions like "I don't really remember." A perfect, smooth story, told in the same words every time, is sometimes a rehearsed story.

4. Answers that dodge the question. You ask "Did you take the money from the drawer?" and the answer is "Do you really think I'd do something like that?" That's a question instead of an answer. Or: "I would never steal" (which is an opinion about themselves, not a fact). Or a long moral preamble before getting to the point. People who are telling the truth usually answer the question.

5. Overall tension. DePaulo and her colleagues found that liars appear, on average, a little more tense: a higher-pitched voice, more dilated pupils, less cooperative in telling their story. These are small effects, but real ones, especially when the stakes are high.

Notice what these five points have in common. None of them, on its own, means "lie." They're all signals of discomfort, effort, or control.

And discomfort has a hundred possible causes: shame, embarrassment, fear of being judged, a painful memory. That's why you need the book's second rule: clusters, never a single signal. And above all, you need to understand what's going on inside a liar's head.

Cognitive Load: Why Lying Is Exhausting

The most important breakthrough of the last twenty years in the study of lying didn't come from watching gestures. It came from a simple idea: lying is hard work.

Think about what a liar has to do. They have to invent a story that holds up. They have to remember what they've already said. They have to control their own reactions. They have to watch whether the other person believes them. And all the while, they have to keep the truth out of their head, while it keeps pushing its way back in. It's like driving through an unfamiliar city while talking on the phone and eating a sandwich.

Someone telling the truth has a much lighter job: they only have to remember.

From this idea, Aldert Vrij, in *Detecting Lies and Deceit* (2008) and in many studies with his colleagues, drew a practical conclusion. Instead of hunting for the telltale gesture, it's better to increase the speaker's cognitive load. People telling the truth can handle the extra load without much trouble. Liars, who are already close to their limit, start to struggle visibly: longer pauses, contradictions, thinner stories.

Two experiments show clearly how this works.

Reverse order. In 2008, Vrij and his colleagues asked a number of people to recount an event, some telling the truth and others lying. Some told it in normal order, others in reverse order, from the end back to the beginning. Liars usually prepare their story going forward. Telling it in reverse is much harder when it's made up. The result: in reverse order, the liars' signs of difficulty became more obvious, and observers were better at telling who was lying.

Unexpected questions. In 2009, another study by Vrij and his colleagues tested pairs of people who had to claim they'd had lunch together at a restaurant. Some pairs really had been there; others hadn't and had prepared their story. On the questions they expected ("What did you eat?"), the liars' answers were as good as the truth tellers'. Then came questions nobody saw coming, like drawing the layout of the tables or saying who sat where. That's where the lying pairs got into trouble: their drawings and their answers matched each other far less.

The lesson is clear. Liars prepare for the obvious questions; the sideways ones, about space, timing, and practical details, catch them off guard. Truth tellers draw on a real memory, and the details are already there. But there's still a delicate problem: in everyday life, how do you ask these questions without turning your kitchen or your office into an interrogation room?

Asking Questions Without Playing Cop

An important point first. You're not running an investigation, and the person in front of you isn't a suspect. It's your child, your business partner, your spouse, an employee, a salesperson. The relationship is worth more than any single truth. So the goal isn't to "catch them out," but to understand, without destroying trust.

There's also a finding that should convince anyone to drop the interrogation approach. In 1999, Saul Kassin and Christina Fong trained a group of students in an interrogation method widely used by American police, based on watching body signals. Then they showed them videos of people being questioned about small mock crimes, some guilty and some innocent. The trained students didn't get any better at spotting the guilty ones. In fact, they were slightly less accurate than the untrained students, but much more confident. It's the worst possible combination: being wrong with conviction.

Here, instead, is a way of asking questions that really helps, and that's respectful too.

Start with open-ended questions. Not “Were you at Jake’s?” but “How was last night?” A closed question suggests the answer. An open-ended one lets the person tell the story, and a freely told account is the richest material you have.

Let them talk, without interrupting. Listen to the whole story. Notice where it stretches out and where it shrinks, where the details show up and where they vanish. The gaps are often more interesting than the words.

Ask for unexpected details, with curiosity. “So what did you eat?” “Who else was there?” “What was the place like?” Said in a light tone, it’s just a normal conversation. For someone telling the truth, it’s easy. For someone who made it up, it’s slippery ground.

If needed, ask them to walk through it in reverse order. “Wait, I’m not clear on the timing. Let’s start from the end: what time did you leave? And before that?” Don’t use it as an interrogation trick, but as a natural way to clear things up.

Don’t show your cards right away. If you already know something, don’t say it at the start. In 2006, the Swedish researchers Maria Hartwig, Pär Anders Granhag, and their colleagues showed that interviewers who kept the evidence to themselves and used it only after hearing the account detected lies much better than those who revealed it right away. The reason is simple: if you say up front, “I saw you at the coffee shop at eleven,” the other person adjusts the story around what you know. If you let them tell it first, you can see whether their version fits the facts.

Keep your tone calm. Pressure increases everyone’s discomfort, guilty and innocent alike. And an innocent person under pressure often shows the same signals as a guilty one. Which brings us straight to the last idea in this chapter.

The Othello Error

In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Othello is convinced that his wife, Desdemona, is betraying him. When he accuses her, she’s devastated, she

cries, she's afraid. Othello sees that fear and reads it as proof of guilt. In reality, Desdemona is innocent: she's afraid because she realizes he won't believe her, and that his accusation could cost her her life.

Paul Ekman, in *Telling Lies* (1985), called this mechanism the Othello error: mistaking the fear of not being believed for the fear of being caught. It may be the most dangerous mistake in all of body reading, because it hits honest people in particular.

Think about what happens when someone accuses you of something you didn't do. Your heart races. Your voice rises or cracks. You feel trapped. You start overexplaining, and you may even contradict yourself on the details because the agitation scrambles your memory. From the outside, you look exactly like someone who's lying.

Now imagine the same situation for someone who has less power than the person accusing them: a kid facing a parent, an employee facing the boss, a foreigner facing a government official. In these cases, the fear of not being believed is sky-high. And so the signs of discomfort are very strong even when the person is completely innocent.

Ekman also points to a twin error: forgetting individual differences. Some people look nervous even when they're just saying "good morning." Others stay poker-faced even when they're lying through their teeth. If you don't know their baseline, you're judging their personality, not their honesty.

How do you protect yourself from this mistake? With three questions to ask yourself before you conclude anything:

1. Does this person have reason to fear not being believed, even if they're telling the truth?
2. How well do I know their normal behavior in tense situations?
3. Have I asked open-ended questions and listened to the whole account, or have I already made up my mind and I'm just looking for confirmation?

IN PRACTICE

The Register Comes Up Short

Vince, 48, owns a hardware store in a small town and has two employees: Emma, 34, who has been there for six years, and Dylan, 23, hired a few months ago. One Monday, when he closes out the register, it's \$150 short. On Saturday afternoon, those two were the only ones in the store.

Vince's gut reaction is immediate: it was Dylan. He's new, he's young, and when Vince mentioned it to him in passing, he turned red, stammered, and said "I had nothing to do with it, I swear" in a shaky voice. Emma, on the other hand, answered calmly, looking him in the eye: "That's strange. The register was right when I closed it."

But then Vince stops to think it through. Dylan's blushing and shaky voice could be the Othello error in its purest form: a twenty-three-year-old, recently hired, terrified of being taken for a thief. And Emma's calm proves nothing: she's always calm, that's her baseline.

The next day he talks to each of them separately, in a relaxed tone. He doesn't accuse anyone. He says he wants to piece Saturday back together to figure out where the mistake is. Open-ended questions: "Walk me through the afternoon, from the beginning."

Dylan's account is all over the place. He corrects himself ("No, wait, the lady with the screws came in earlier"), and he adds pointless details about a customer who wanted to exchange a drill. When Vince asks him who rang up the last sale, he thinks about it and says: "I think Emma did. I was straightening up the back."

Emma describes a neat, precise afternoon, almost in chronological order. Then Vince asks a question she isn't expecting: "What time did the delivery driver come by, and who signed for the package?" She hesitates, something she never does. She pushes her chair back. She answers with a question: "Why? What does the delivery have to do with anything?" Then she adds that maybe she signed for it, but she doesn't really remember.

Vince has no proof. All he has is a hot spot: the delivery. He checks the delivery receipt. The driver had brought a C.O.D. package for \$150, paid in cash. Emma had taken the money from the register without writing it down, and then forgot about it. When the shortfall came to light on Monday, she put two and two together, got scared, and decided to keep quiet, hoping it would all blow over. There was no theft: there was a lapse of memory and the fear of looking bad after six years of spotless work.

If Vince had followed his first instinct, he would have accused the only one of the two who had nothing to do with it.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake isn't about any particular signal. It's about confidence in yourself.

In 1997, Bella DePaulo and her colleagues analyzed dozens of studies to answer a simple question: are people who feel more confident in their judgment more often right about whether someone is lying? The answer was no. Confidence and accuracy had almost nothing to do with each other. You can feel absolutely certain and still be wrong.

The problem gets worse once you're suspicious. As soon as we think "I bet they're lying," we start seeing only the signals that confirm it and dismissing the ones that contradict it. That's what Deborah did in the kitchen: she saw the fridge, the eyes, the neck, and didn't notice that Eddie acts like that every Sunday.

How do you avoid it? Treat every suspicion as a hypothesis, not a conclusion. Actively look for whatever would disprove it. And remember that 54 percent. If, on average, we get it right only slightly more than one time in two, nobody has a monopoly on the truth. Leaving room for doubt isn't weakness: it's the only way to really see the person in front of you.

EXERCISE

This exercise lasts one week, and it trains your mind more than your eye.

1. **Play Two Truths and a Lie.** With friends or family, everyone tells three short stories from their own life: two true and one made up. The others have to guess which one is false. Keep track of how often you guess right. It will help you cut your confidence down to size.
2. **During the game, ask unexpected questions.** Instead of watching only the gestures, ask about side details: “What was the weather like?” “Who was with you?” “What was he wearing?” Notice whether the made-up story holds up worse.
3. **Practice open-ended questions.** For three days, in ordinary conversations, swap closed questions (“Did it go well?”) for open-ended ones (“How did it go?”). Notice how much richer the answers get.
4. **Look for hot spots.** In any conversation, notice whether there’s a moment when the other person’s behavior changes. Don’t interpret it. Just write down the topic.
5. **The Othello test.** Think back to a time when someone doubted you while you were telling the truth. How did your body react? Write it down. The next time you suspect someone, reread what you wrote.
6. **Revisit an old suspicion.** Pick an episode when you were sure someone was lying. What signals were you relying on? In light of this chapter, would they still hold up?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There is no lie gesture: on average, we spot lies only slightly better than chance, at about 54 percent (Bond and DePaulo, 2006).
- Shifty eyes are the most widespread myth in the world, and they're not a reliable indicator; in fact, liars often move less.
- Watch for changes after a specific question, mismatches between words and body, stories that are too smooth, and answers that dodge the question: they're points to dig into, not proof.
- Lying takes effort (Vrij): reverse order and unexpected questions trip up people who are inventing, not people who are remembering.
- Ask open-ended questions, listen to the whole story, don't reveal what you know right away, and keep your tone calm.
- Watch out for the Othello error (Ekman): the fear of not being believed looks a lot like the fear of being caught.

Interest and Attraction

Friday, happy hour at a busy bar downtown. Lauren, thirty-six, an architect, is there for a friend's birthday. Among the guests is Liam, who works with the birthday girl and whom Lauren met half an hour ago. They've been talking for twenty minutes, standing near the bar, about travel and a movie they've both seen.

Lauren wonders whether he's interested or just being nice. Liam laughs at her jokes, but he laughs at everyone else's too. He asked her the name of her firm, but that could be professional curiosity. When a friend came over, Liam turned to say hello, and for a moment she felt left out.

Then she notices some small things. When the friend leaves, Liam turns back toward her with his whole body, not just his head. His glass, which he was holding in front of his chest earlier, is now resting on the bar. He has moved half a step closer. And when Lauren tucks her hair behind her ear, a moment later Liam runs a hand over the back of his neck. They drink at almost the same time. They laugh together.

Lauren doesn't know what Liam feels. Nobody does, sometimes not even Liam himself. But all those signals together tell one story with a certain clarity: right now, Liam would rather be there with her than anywhere else.

That's what you can really read when it comes to interest: not thoughts, not intentions, but direction. The body moves toward what it likes and

away from what it doesn't. In this chapter, you'll learn to see that direction in friendship, in couples, and on first dates. And you'll also learn the most important limit of all: a body signal is never an answer.

Moving Toward, Moving Away: The Basic Rule

In 1971, in his book *Silent Messages*, the psychologist Albert Mehrabian put a name to a rule as simple as it is useful. He called it the immediacy principle: people move toward what they like and away from what they don't like. That holds for food, for places, and above all for people.

The body does this in many ways, and you've already met almost all of them in earlier chapters. Here we'll put them together, because interest doesn't show up in one signal: it shows up in the sum.

Orientation. Torso, feet, and head turned toward the other person. When someone talks to you with their head turned your way but their feet pointing at the exit, their interest is only halfway there (you saw this in Chapter 3). When their whole body is turned toward you, even when someone else walks up, the message is stronger.

Distance. Closing it, little by little, over the course of the conversation. Not all at once, which would feel intrusive, but in small steps: the chair that inches closer, the elbow on the table, the torso leaning forward. It's the opposite of the compensation you saw in Chapter 9: there, the body was correcting for too much closeness; here, it's seeking it out.

Barriers that disappear. The glass that moves from the chest to the table, the bag that shifts from front to back, the arms that open. Objects between two people are often a way of protecting yourself (Chapter 4). When they're removed, the person is starting to feel at ease.

Time. The most underrated signal. People who are interested find reasons to stay: another coffee, another question, "Are you in a hurry?" People who aren't find reasons to leave.

Attention. Questions about your life, remembering details you mentioned, picking up a conversation you left halfway. This isn't a body signal in the strict sense, but it's the best check you have: the body can be tired or shy, but attention to detail is hard to fake for long.

And the signals of disinterest? They mirror the ones above. The body turning to the side, the feet pointing at the door, the eyes searching for other people, the phone checked often, short answers with no questions back, the distance growing. One alone means nothing (maybe they're waiting for an important call). All of them together, and increasing, send a clear message.

Remember the book's fourth rule: changes matter more than positions. A shy person can start out closed and open up little by little. That gradual opening is a far more reliable signal than any starting position.

Mirroring: When Two Bodies Keep Time

In the happy hour scene, did you notice that Lauren touches her hair and, shortly after, Liam touches the back of his neck? That they drink at almost the same time? That's no accident.

In 1999, Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh published a study that gave this phenomenon a name: the chameleon effect. In the first experiment, participants talked with a confederate of the researchers who, during the conversation, either touched their face or jiggled a foot. Without realizing it, the participants began doing the same thing: they touched their face with the person who touched their face, and jiggled a foot with the person who jiggled a foot.

In the second experiment, the reverse happened: this time it was the confederate who discreetly mimicked the participants' posture and gestures. At the end, those who had been mimicked rated the other person as more likable and the conversation as more pleasant. No one had noticed the mimicry.

What does this tell us? Two things.

First: imitating each other is an automatic process that happens on its own when two people are in sync. We don't decide to do it. It just happens.

Second: mirroring and liking reinforce each other. The better two people get along, the more they mirror each other. The more they mirror each other, the better they get along.

So when you're reading interest, mirroring is a good indicator. Notice whether their postures resemble each other: both leaning back, both leaning forward, legs crossed the same way. Notice whether their rhythms line up: they drink together, laugh together, talk at a similar speed (remember Pentland's honest signals from Chapter 8). Above all, notice whether, when one person shifts position, the other follows a few seconds later.

A study by the Austrian ethologist Karl Grammer and his colleagues, published in 1998, filmed pairs of strangers, a man and a woman, left alone in a room for a few minutes. Analyzing the videos by computer, the researchers found that when there was interest (in that study, especially when the woman was interested), what mattered was less the imitation of individual gestures than synchrony: the two people's movements fell into step over time, like a dance where nobody leads.

There is a caveat, though: mirroring can also be faked to create artificial trust (we'll get to that in Chapter 14). For now, all you need to know is that spontaneous mirroring is fluid, with small delays and small differences. Forced mirroring is mechanical, too perfectly timed. If you feel like you're facing a mirror, something's off.

When the connection is real, though, the body doesn't just move in step: it starts sending more targeted signals.

Gaze, Smiles, and Preening Gestures

Some signals have become "the signs of attraction" in popular culture: touching your hair, adjusting your clothes, the lingering gaze. Let's see how much of that is true.

In 1985, the American researcher Monica Moore published a study that became famous. She spent many hours observing women in various settings, mostly singles bars, and cataloged the nonverbal behaviors they used toward men. She counted dozens: brief, repeated glances, smiles, laughter, fixing their hair, tilting their head, leaning forward, lightly touching the other person. She found that the women who made these gestures most often were approached most often. In prac-

tice, very often the first move didn't come from the person who walked over, but from the person who had sent the signals first.

It's an interesting study, but take it with a grain of salt: it's forty years old, it observed the American bars of that era, and it looked only at women, even though men send signals that are just as clear. What still holds up today is the core idea: interest is communicated through small, repeated gestures, never through a single one.

Let's look at them one by one.

Touching your hair, face, or clothes. Ethologists call these "preening" gestures, like birds smoothing their feathers. Fixing your hair, straightening your tie or collar, running a hand over your face can be a way of making yourself more presentable in front of someone who matters to you. But careful: the same gestures are also pacifying behaviors (Chapter 1) when we're nervous. And sometimes hair is just in the way. Without the rest of the picture, they say nothing.

The lingering gaze. Holding eye contact a little longer than usual, looking away, and then coming back. This pattern (look, look down, look again) is typical of interest mixed with a bit of shyness. A fixed, insistent stare, on the other hand, isn't interest: it's pressure (Chapter 7).

The genuine smile. The one that reaches the eyes too, the Duchenne smile you saw in Chapter 6. A polite smile can last all evening. A genuine smile comes and goes, tied to what's happening in the conversation.

Touch. Light, brief, on "neutral" areas like the arm, the shoulder, the back of the hand. It often goes with a laugh or an important sentence. Touch is one of the strongest signals, and that's exactly why it's also the one that demands the most respect. More on that shortly.

The head tilt. Tilting your head to the side while the other person talks shows listening and openness. It's a sign of attention, not necessarily of attraction: people who are simply friendly do it with everyone, too.

Friends, Couples, First Dates: Same Alphabet, Different Sentences

The signals you've seen apply in very different settings. But they need to be read differently.

In friendship. Interest between friends, or between coworkers who are starting to bond, shows up mostly in choice. At the coffee machine, who does the speaker turn their torso toward? At the pizza place, who sits down next to whom? When someone cracks a joke in a group of friends, who do they look at first to see if that person is laughing? The same goes outside the room: in the class parents' group chat, who replies right away, and who engages with whom? Liking always leaves traces of direction.

In a long-term couple. Here the point isn't figuring out whether there's interest, but noticing whether it's changing. The most valuable signals are the ones that disappear. They used to eat facing each other; now each one looks at their phone. They used to sit close on the couch; now they sit at opposite ends. They used to mirror each other without knowing it; now their rhythms are out of sync. None of this proves anything: it can be fatigue, a rough stretch at work, a loss in the family. But it is an invitation to talk, before physical distance turns into real distance.

And the reverse is true, too. A couple who, after twenty years, still look for each other's eyes when someone tells a funny story at dinner, who brush against each other passing in the kitchen, who sit on the same side of the table, are showing a living bond without needing to say so.

On a first date. This is the hardest case, because there's no baseline. You don't know how this person behaves with anyone else. That's why two of the book's rules matter more than ever here: look at clusters of signals, and look at the changes over the course of the evening. Someone who is closed and stiff for the first ten minutes, then sits back more comfortably, takes off their jacket, leans forward, and starts asking you questions is giving you a much clearer signal than someone

who's outgoing from the very first second, and who may well be like that with everyone.

A simple way to get a baseline even on a first date: watch how the person treats other people. The server, the friend who stops by to say hello, the people at the next table. If they smile at everyone, move close to everyone, and touch everyone's arm, those gestures aren't special when they're aimed at you. If they're reserved with others but not with you, they are.

Signals Are Not a Yes

Let's stop on a crucial point.

Everything you've read so far helps you figure out whether someone is enjoying your company. It doesn't tell you what they want to do next. And above all, it never takes the place of their words.

There's a scientific reason to take this very seriously. In 1982, the American psychologist Antonia Abbey had a group of people watch a conversation between a man and a woman. Then she asked them to judge how interested the woman was in the man, romantically or sexually. On average, the male observers read much more sexual interest into the woman's friendliness than the female observers saw in it. Later research, such as the work of Martie Haselton and David Buss in 2000, confirmed that, on average, men tend to overestimate women's sexual interest.

Beyond the average differences between men and women, the lesson applies to everyone: when we want something, we tend to see signals that confirm it. Friendliness becomes interest. A smile becomes an invitation. A laugh becomes a promise. It's the same confirmation bias you saw in the chapter on lying, just pointing in the opposite direction. That's why a few rules need to be crystal clear:

1. **Friendliness is not interest.** The salesclerk who smiles at you, the coworker who laughs at your jokes, the barista who remem-

bers your coffee order: often they're polite people, or people doing their job.

2. **Interest is not consent.** Even if every signal says someone enjoys being with you, that doesn't mean they want a kiss, a date, or anything else. You ask, in words.
3. **A spoken no always outweighs any signal.** If someone says "no," "not tonight," or "I'd rather not," no smile, look, or touch from earlier cancels it out.
4. **Signals can say no, too.** If the person stiffens, pulls away, stops looking at you, or answers in single words, stop. The body often says no before the mouth finds the courage.
5. **Consent can be withdrawn.** A positive signal from an hour ago doesn't last forever. What counts is what's happening now.

Asking in words doesn't ruin the magic, whatever a lot of people think. A line like "Would you like to see each other again?" or "May I?" makes the other person feel respected. And respect, in the end, is the most attractive thing there is.

If you're in a relationship where the other person's insistence frightens you, or where your no goes unheard, this isn't a problem of reading signals. Talk to someone you trust, or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233), free and open around the clock.

IN PRACTICE

The Thursday Dinner

Mark, forty-seven, has been separated for three years and works as an engineer. He met Jenna, forty-four, an English teacher, in a photography class. After a few texts, he invites her to dinner at a small Italian restaurant downtown.

For the first few minutes, Jenna is composed: back straight, hands in her lap, purse on her knees. She answers willingly but asks few questions. Mark doesn't jump to conclusions: it's a first date, and that's probably just the nerves of the first few minutes. Instead, he watches

how Jenna treats other people: with the waiter, she's polite but brief, almost formal.

After the first glass of wine, things change. Jenna sets her purse on the empty chair beside her. She leans forward when he tells her about a photo that came out blurry in class. She laughs, and her smile reaches her eyes. At one point a strand of hair falls across her face: she brushes it aside, and as she does, she keeps looking at him. When he leans back in his chair, a few seconds later she does too.

Mark notices the change: from closed to open, from stiff to relaxed, with a synchrony that developed on its own. With the waiter, who comes back to bring dessert, she stays as formal as before. The warmth is all for him.

Outside the restaurant, the classic moment arrives. Mark is tempted to lean in for a kiss. But he notices that Jenna, the moment she stepped out into the cold night air, crossed her arms, took half a step back, and is looking off down the street. It could be the cold. It could be awkwardness. It could be a "not yet."

He doesn't know, and he doesn't guess. He asks her, with a smile: "I had a really great time tonight. Would you like to get together again next week?" Jenna smiles and uncrosses her arms. "Yes, I'd love that." She steps closer, kisses him on the cheek, and heads for her car.

Mark read the evening well. But above all, he understood that when a signal is unclear, the best move is a simple question. He got what really mattered, seeing her again, without rushing things.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

The most common mistake is falling in love with a single signal. "She touched her hair, so she likes me." "He looked at me twice, so he's interested." "He sat down next to me, so it's in the bag."

A single signal means nothing on its own. People touch their hair out of nerves, eyes meet by chance, the seat next to you was the only one

free. Only a cluster of signals pointing in the same direction, and growing over time, tells you something.

There's also the opposite mistake, less well known but just as common: mistaking shyness for lack of interest. A shy person can be very interested and still show closed signals: eyes down, arms held tight, short answers. The difference is in the return. Someone who isn't interested pulls away and stays away. Someone who is shy pulls away and then comes back: the glance that darts off and reappears, the conversation that picks up again, the text that arrives the next day.

In both cases, the fix is the same: watch the whole movie, not a single frame. And when the doubt remains, let words settle it.

EXERCISE

One week to train your eye on interest, your own and other people's.

1. **Watch a group of friends.** At your next dinner or happy hour, notice who each person's body is turned toward. Who talks to whom, who sits next to whom, who looks at whom when they laugh. Then ask yourself whether it matches what you know about their friendships.
2. **Look for mirroring.** In a conversation where you're enjoying yourself, notice how many times you and the other person have similar postures or make the same gestures a moment apart. Don't do it on purpose: just notice it.
3. **Watch for change.** When you meet someone new, compare the first five minutes with the last five. What changed in distance, orientation, barriers, smiles?
4. **Use other people's baselines.** The next time you think someone likes you, watch how that person behaves with the others around. Are the signals toward you different, or the same?
5. **Watch your own relationship, or a couple you know well.** At dinner or on the couch, notice orientation, distance, synchrony. Not to judge: to see how much the body reveals about the bond.
6. **Practice asking.** For one week, every time you're unsure what another person wants (a friend, your partner, a coworker), ask instead of guessing. Note how they react and how many times you had read it wrong.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The body moves toward what it likes and away from what it doesn't (Mehrabian, 1971): interest shows in direction, not in a single gesture.
- Orientation, closing distance, disappearing barriers, time, and attention to detail, taken together, tell the story of interest.
- Spontaneous mirroring grows out of rapport and strengthens it (Chartrand and Bargh, 1999); forced mirroring is too precise.
- Touching the hair, repeated glances, and genuine smiles only count inside a cluster of signals and against the person's baseline.
- We tend to see more interest than is really there (Abbey, 1982): friendliness isn't interest, and interest isn't consent.
- When in doubt, ask in words: a spoken no outweighs any signal.

At Work

Monday morning, a second-floor conference room at a trucking company on the edge of town. Megan, thirty-eight, the logistics manager, has spent two weeks preparing her proposal: switch van suppliers and save on maintenance. She talks for ten minutes, the slides roll by, the numbers add up.

The director, sitting at the head of the table, nods often. He says “Interesting” twice. Megan leaves the room convinced she’s won.

A week later, the proposal has been “postponed until further notice.”

Thinking back, Megan remembers a detail that slid right past her at the time. Every time the director said “interesting,” his eyes went straight to Pete, the finance manager, sitting at the far end of the table by the window. Pete barely spoke. But when she showed the cost table, he closed his notebook, laid his pen on top of it, and pushed his chair back a little. The other two colleagues, after every question, looked at him too.

The director was nodding. But the person deciding was Pete. And Pete, with his body, had said no after three minutes.

This chapter takes everything you’ve read so far into the place where you spend much of your day: work. The interview, the meeting, the negotiation, the client, the video call. These are situations with their own rules, and knowing them changes the way you read people.

Work Is a Stage

At work, almost nobody behaves the way they do at home. Everyone plays a bit of a role: the boss has to look confident, the salesperson friendly, the candidate calm, the coworker cooperative. That isn't fakeness. It's professional manners, and without them offices would be unmanageable.

For the observer, though, this changes things. Role politeness covers up a lot of signals. The client's smile, the supplier's "sure, sure," the director's nod are often social habits, not real answers.

This is where the book's four rules carry even more weight.

The baseline has to be taken in the work context, not outside it. A coworker who is loud at the coffee shop may be quiet in meetings out of habit, and that silence means nothing. If they're loud in meetings too and today they say nothing, then yes, something has changed.

Clusters matter more than ever, because a single gesture at the office has a thousand ordinary explanations: an uncomfortable chair, the air conditioning blasting, the third coffee, a night spent up with a feverish child.

Context decides: a meeting with your boss's boss is not the Friday afternoon meeting.

And above all, changes. At work, the most valuable signal is almost always a sudden shift in response to a specific sentence: a number, a name, a deadline, a price. That's where the role cracks for an instant and the body has its say.

Keep one thing in mind. At work there's almost always something concrete at stake: a job, a contract, a promotion. Tension is normal for everyone. Whoever mistakes it for a sign of guilt is wrong before they even start. And nowhere is tension higher than in a job interview.

The Interview, from Both Sides

A job interview is one of the most stressful moments of adult life. It's stressful for the person being interviewed, and for the person doing the interviewing too, more than it seems.

If you're the one hiring. The first thing to know is that almost every candidate arrives nervous. Cold hands, a voice a little higher than usual, nervous laughs, legs moving under the table. These signals say "I care and I'm afraid of getting it wrong," not "I'm lying" and not "I can't do the job." Paul Ekman called it the Othello error: mistaking the fear of not being believed for a sign of guilt (we covered it in the chapter on lying). In interviews it happens all the time.

That's why the most useful thing you can do is give the candidate two or three minutes of small talk at the start: the traffic on the highway, finding a parking spot, the break-room coffee. It isn't wasted time. It's your baseline. You see how they talk when nothing is at stake, how much they gesture, how much they look at you, what their voice sounds like. Then, when the real questions come, you know what has changed.

The questions that reveal the most are the ones that ask for a story: "Tell me about a time when a project went badly. What did you do, day by day?" People who actually lived that experience usually add spontaneous details, correct themselves, remember small and somewhat useless things. People who are constructing it stay vague. It isn't proof, but it's a clue worth more than any gesture.

And remember: a good, nervous candidate becomes a good, calm coworker after a month. A candidate who is flawless in the interview is sometimes just a person who is good at interviews.

There's also an effect many interviewers underestimate: your body is talking to the candidate too. If you greet them with your torso turned toward your screen, take a phone call halfway through, or read their résumé while they're talking, their anxiety rises and their answers get worse. At that point you're no longer evaluating the person: you're evaluating how they react to your lack of interest. A normal welcome,

with your gaze and torso facing the person in front of you, gives you a candidate closer to their baseline. And so a fairer judgment.

If you're the one being interviewed. The interviewer sends signals too, and reading them helps you adjust as you talk.

Signs you're doing well: the interviewer leans forward, takes notes while you talk (not after you've finished), asks follow-up questions about what you just said. And above all, they start talking in the future tense: "Here you'd be working with...", "In your first month you'd be handling..." When someone already pictures you inside the company, it often slips out in their verb tenses.

Signs that interest is fading: questions that follow the list without picking up on your answers, eyes drifting to the clock or the screen, the folder closed before the end, a torso that leans back in the chair and stays there. If you see them, don't panic. Pause, keep it shorter, ask a question yourself: that's often enough to bring the attention back to you.

Even the first second, at the door, counts. Greg Stewart and colleagues (2008) observed mock interviews: candidates who gave a firm handshake while making eye contact received better ratings. It's the first signal you send, and it colors everything that follows. How to use it to your advantage is something we'll see in the next chapter.

Meetings: Who Really Decides

In meetings, official power and real power don't always line up. The org chart says who signs. People's bodies say who counts.

The most reliable signal is where the eyes go. When a hard question, a joke, or an awkward number comes up, people instinctively look toward whoever has the final say. It happens in a split second, and almost nobody notices. If you see the group's eyes converging on the same person again and again, that's the person to convince. Even if they're sitting at the far end and haven't said a word.

In the chapter on the eyes, you met John Dovidio and Steve Ellyson's visual dominance ratio (1982). In a meeting it becomes a practical tool:

people who look straight at others while speaking, and allow themselves to look elsewhere while others speak, usually feel high up. People who do the opposite, listening with their eyes glued to the speaker and looking down when it's their turn, usually feel lower down. Watch for it in everyone, not just the boss: sometimes you discover that the real weight in the room sits somewhere else.

Other useful clues, always to be read together: - who gets interrupted and who doesn't; - who speaks last before the decision; - who sits down without asking, and where (we talked about territories in the chapter on distance); - who stands up first and gets everyone else to stand.

Then there's silent disagreement. In many meetings nobody says no out loud, especially in front of the boss. The no shows up in the body: the torso moving away from the table, lips pressing together, the pen set down, the notebook closed, arms crossing just as a number appears (not ten minutes earlier, when the room was simply cold). Someone who stops taking notes halfway through your presentation is telling you something.

And there's the moment of decision. It often comes before anyone announces it. The decision-maker changes posture: breathes out, leans back, puts their hands on the table, starts asking practical questions ("And the timeline?" "Who's handling it?"). When the questions move from "if" to "how," the game is nearly over. If instead the decision-maker stiffens and goes quiet, don't unload more slides on them: stop and ask what isn't working for them.

The same mechanism applies when the person across the table isn't a coworker but a client.

Negotiations, Clients, and Salespeople

Every negotiation, from a contractor's quote for a bathroom remodel to signing a hundred-thousand-dollar supply contract, follows the same pattern: figuring out how far the other person can go without showing your own cards right away.

In the chapter on the voice, you saw Alex Pentland's "honest signals." One of his studies is about negotiations: with Jared Curhan (2007), he recorded simulated negotiations and, from the vocal signals of the first five minutes alone, was able to partly predict how they would end. The practical lesson is that body and voice take sides early, long before the signature. Whoever waits until the end to figure out how it's going has already lost half the information.

Signs of interest. An interested person keeps coming back to the item: looks at it again, touches it, turns it over, rereads the quote. They ask small, practical questions: the warranty, the color, the timeline. Their torso moves closer. If they're there as a couple, they look for the other person's eyes to see what they think. Real interest often shows precisely when a customer acts indifferent in words but can't take their eyes off the product.

Signs of resistance. The torso pulls back, the hands close or disappear, the answers get shorter, the rhythm of the voice changes. A pacifying behavior shows up (a hand on the neck, a rub of the back of the neck) right after you've said the price. It doesn't mean "no." It means "there's a problem here." That's the moment to stop and ask, not to talk more.

The moment the other person has decided. This is the most valuable signal, and the easiest to miss for someone who talks too much. When a person has decided to buy, the body relaxes: the shoulders drop, the breathing lengthens, sometimes a small smile appears. The questions turn logistical: "When can you deliver it?" "Can we pay in two installments?" At that point, close the catalog: every extra word can only reopen a doubt. When instead they've decided not to buy, the body is already out the door: the feet point to the exit, the torso turns, the eyes look for the door or the phone.

And when you're the one buying? Remember that a good salesperson reads you with the same tools. If, in front of the used car or the apartment, your enthusiasm escapes right away (a hand on the hood, eyes lighting up, a "this is perfect" said out loud), the discount evaporates in three seconds. You don't need to fake coldness. One sentence

is enough: “Let me sleep on it and I’ll call you tomorrow.” Buying time keeps your body from giving away your decision in the heat of the moment.

Video Calls: What You Can and Can’t See

Since 2020, a huge share of meetings has happened in front of a screen. For anyone who reads bodies, that’s a radical change: what’s left of the person is a box with a face and shoulders, often grainy, sometimes half a second behind.

What you lose. The feet and legs, the part of the body that, according to Navarro, lies the least, disappear completely. The hands often drop out of the frame. Distances no longer exist: everyone is at the same distance, the screen’s. The rhythm of the conversation, which Pentland considers one of the most honest signals, is disrupted by connection lag: people talk over each other, interrupt without meaning to, leave silences they would never leave in person. Many signs of “discomfort” on a video call are just technical problems.

Gaze is a special case. To look as if they’re meeting your eyes, the other person would have to stare into the camera; but if they stare into the camera, they can’t see you. So everyone looks at the screen, a little lower, and nobody really meets anybody’s gaze. “Avoiding” eye contact on a video call means almost nothing.

In 2021, Jeremy Bailenson of Stanford described why video calls are so tiring: other people’s faces are always in close-up, too near and too fixed; we constantly see our own face, as if in front of a mirror; we stay frozen in the same spot; and we have to work harder to send and receive signals that would pass on their own in person. This fatigue shows: after an hour-long meeting everyone’s face looks duller, and it doesn’t mean they’re bored.

What remains. The voice stays almost intact and becomes your main source: tone, rhythm, pauses, hesitations. The face remains, even if small: broad expressions are visible, flashes much less so. And changes remain: the person who was speaking warmly and suddenly stiffens,

pulls away from the screen, turns off the camera right after a specific question.

Then there are signals that belong to the screen. Eyes sliding sideways, moving as if along a line of text, usually mean the person is reading another window: email, a message. A face lit by changing light tells the same story. The microphone switched on as if to say something, then switched off again, or a “No, nothing” after a breath: an objection held back.

Two practical tips. First: on a video call, ask more in words. “What do you think?” “It seems like something isn’t sitting right with you, am I wrong?” What you would read in the body in person, here you have to ask about. Second: don’t give too much weight to a camera that’s off. It may be lack of interest, but more often it’s a slow connection, a child at home, a messy room, or simple tiredness.

IN PRACTICE

The Sage-Green Kitchen

Nadia, forty-five, has been selling kitchens for fifteen years at a big furniture store on the highway outside town. One Saturday afternoon, Owen and Sylvia, around forty, walk in with a little boy who runs between the display sofas.

Owen speaks first: “We’re just looking, okay? We’ve already been to three other stores.” Arms crossed, heavy coat still on. Nadia reads nothing into those arms: it’s forty-three degrees outside and the store is big. She makes a note of his baseline: Owen talks loudly, quickly, in a brisk tone. Sylvia stays quiet, smiles, looks around.

Nadia shows them three layouts. Owen asks technical questions about the appliances, but his body stays sideways, turned toward the exit. Sylvia, on the other hand, stops in front of a sage-green kitchen. She runs her hand over the countertop. She opens a drawer, closes it gently, opens it again. Twice she steps back to look at it from a distance, and twice she comes back.

Nadia notices the cluster: repeated touching, returning to the same item, distance closing in. And she notices something else. When Owen asks a question, Sylvia keeps looking at the kitchen. When Sylvia says something, Owen turns toward her, looks at her, and then goes quiet.

Which of the two decides? Owen holds the stage, but he's waiting for Sylvia's verdict.

So Nadia changes course. She stops explaining appliances to Owen and asks Sylvia: "How do you usually cook? Do you need a lot of counter space?" Sylvia lights up and starts talking. Owen takes off his coat.

When Nadia shows them the quote, Owen stiffens: torso back, hand on the back of his neck, lips pressed together. "Wow, okay." Nadia doesn't rush to justify the price. She lets a silence sit. Then she asks: "Does it feel over budget, or is there something else?" Owen admits the real problem is the timeline: they're getting married in four months and want the house ready.

At that point Owen's body changes. He sits down, leans on the table, asks how long installation takes. Sylvia touches his arm. Nadia realizes the decision has been made and stops selling: from then on she only talks about dates, delivery, and measurements.

They don't sign that day. They come back the following Saturday, with the room measurements. Nadia didn't read anyone's mind. She just watched who was looking at whom, and stopped talking when their bodies told her it was time.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

Mistaking professional politeness for a yes.

The client who nods, the director who says "interesting," the supplier who smiles and shakes your hand: at work, these gestures are the bare minimum of good manners. Everyone does them, with everyone, all the time. That's why, on their own, they're worth little.

It's the same mistake Megan made in the opening scene. She watched the signals of the person who was talking, not those of the person who was deciding. And she read a polite nod as approval.

How to avoid it: look for signals that cost something. Nodding costs nothing. What does cost something is asking a practical question, requesting a written quote, scheduling a second meeting, bringing another person in. A real yes usually comes with a concrete step. If after a meeting nobody has asked you for anything practical, consider the outcome still open, whatever the faces said.

EXERCISE

The map of glances. Do this in your next three meetings, even short ones, even on video.

1. Note that on a video call you can't see where the glances go: for points 2 and 3, use only in-person meetings; on screen, focus on points 4 and 5.
2. Before the meeting starts, write the participants' names on a sheet of paper and mark who, on paper, has the final say.
3. During the meeting, every time a hard question, a joke, or an important number comes up, put a check mark next to the name of the person everyone's eyes turn toward.
4. Also mark who speaks last before each decision and who never gets interrupted.
5. Write down a single moment when you saw a sharp change in someone (torso pulling away, pen set down, answers getting shorter) and the sentence that came right before it.
6. At the end of the meeting, compare: is the person with the most check marks the one on the org chart? Did the final decision go the way their signals pointed?
7. After three meetings, reread your sheets. You'll have a map of the real power in your workplace that is more accurate than any org chart.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- At work everyone plays a role: politeness covers many signals, so sudden changes are what count.
- In an interview, nerves are normal: take the baseline with two minutes of small talk.
- In a meeting, you can spot who really decides by where the group's eyes go.
- In a negotiation, when the questions move from "if" to "how," the decision is close: stop persuading.
- On a video call, feet, distance, and gaze disappear: rely on the voice and ask more in words.
- A real yes comes with a concrete step; a polite nod isn't enough.

Your Body Is Talking

Thursday morning, a small architecture firm downtown. The weekly meeting: the owner, four drafters and architects, coffee in paper cups.

Gavin is twenty-nine and has been a drafter for two years. He has found an error in the plans for a small apartment building: the width of the stairs doesn't meet the building code. He spent the evening rechecking the numbers. He's sure.

When his turn comes, he talks with his eyes on his notes. Low, fast voice. He starts like this: "Sorry, this is probably nothing, but..." His hands are under the table, squeezed between his knees. Every sentence ends with his voice going up, as if it were a question. The owner checks his phone. A coworker cuts him short: "Okay, let's talk about it later."

Ten minutes later Richard, the most senior architect, raises the same point. He rests his forearms on the table, looks the owner in the eye, and says: "There's a problem with the stairs. The width has to be re-done." Then he stops. He doesn't add a thing.

The owner puts down his phone. "You're right. Let's fix it right away."

Gavin had spotted the error first. He had the numbers in hand. But his body, before his words even got there, had told everyone: "Don't listen to me."

So far, you've learned to read other people. In this chapter, you turn to the mirror. Your body is talking too, all the time, and other people read it even if they've never opened a book on the subject. The good

news is that you don't have to become someone else to be heard. And you don't have to throw out the four rules you've used so far, either: baseline, clusters, context, and changes still apply when the person you're observing is you.

Confidence Without the Act

First principle: no postures to copy.

Plenty of guides promise “winning” stances: feet planted wide, chin up, a fixed stare, a handshake of steel. The result, almost always, is someone who looks tense or looks like they're acting. And people notice. In the chapter on lies, you saw that what makes people suspicious isn't a gesture but a mismatch between words, voice, and body. A “textbook” body laid over a different emotion is exactly that kind of mismatch.

The real goal is more modest and more effective: cut the noise. Cut the signals of discomfort that say “I'm afraid I'm bothering you” even when that isn't true. Hands that disappear, a voice that shoots up, apologizing up front, eyes that never lift from the page, a body that shrinks into the chair.

Second principle: just a few things, one at a time. If you try to control your posture, gaze, voice, hands, and breathing all at once, your head overloads and you speak worse than before. Pick one thing, practice it until it feels natural, then move on to the next.

Third principle: body and mood talk to each other in both directions. When you're calm inside, your body relaxes. But the reverse is also partly true: slow breathing and a comfortable posture help you find a bit of calm again. It's not a trick, it's basic physiology. Later on we'll see how far this effect goes, and where it's been blown out of proportion.

Fourth principle: from the outside, confidence looks like ease, not strength. A person at ease moves without hurrying, looks without staring, leaves a few silences, and doesn't need to take up the whole room. That's what other people read as confidence.

First Impressions

In the chapter on the baseline, you saw how quickly a judgment forms: a tenth of a second for a face (Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov, 2006), a few seconds of silent video to size up a teacher (Nalini Ambady and Robert Rosenthal, 1993). There, those studies were a reason to distrust your first impressions of other people. Here we turn them around: they also apply to the first impression other people form of you.

What do we take from this? Two things.

First: a first impression isn't a line of reasoning. It's a quick reaction that rests on very few signals: how you walk in, how you move, what expression you have, how your voice sounds in your first few words. You don't choose your face. You do choose how you make your entrance.

Second: a first impression isn't a life sentence. It can be corrected with time and with actions. But correcting it takes more effort than getting it right from the start.

Entering a Room

This is the moment when the impression forms. A few simple things:

- Before you go in, take a slow breath. Not a deep, movie-style one: a normal one, just longer.
- Walk in at a normal pace, without rushing and without shuffling. People who rush in look late even when they're on time.
- Pause for a moment just inside the door and look at who's there. Half a second is enough.
- Keep your hands free and visible: phone and folder in one hand, or in your bag.
- Catch the eye of whoever is greeting you and be the first to say hello.

It's not choreography. It's simply the opposite of what happens when you're tense: head down, quick steps, apologies already on your lips.

Your First Words

After your entrance comes your voice, and here too a little care goes a long way. Say your full name, clearly, without swallowing it: "Good

morning, I'm Rebecca Gallagher." A lot of people mumble their last name, almost as if apologizing for the intrusion, and the other person has to ask, "Sorry, what was that?" Repeat the other person's name when they tell you ("Nice to meet you, Dr. Ferris"): it helps you remember it and shows them you were really listening. And in the first few minutes, let the other person set the tone: if they address you formally, stay formal until they invite you to switch to first names. These are small details, but a first impression is made almost entirely of small details, lined up in a few seconds.

The Handshake and the Greeting

There are a thousand ways to say hello: a handshake, a hug or a kiss on the cheek between friends, a clap on the shoulder between longtime coworkers, a nod across the coffee shop. Context decides. At work, with people you don't know, the handshake is still the most common greeting.

In the previous chapter, you met the study by Greg Stewart and colleagues (2008): in mock interviews, a firm handshake combined with direct eye contact was linked to slightly better ratings. The interesting detail is that the handshake didn't work on its own: it was part of an overall impression of someone present and at ease.

How to do it well: - A dry hand. If your palms sweat, wipe them on a tissue before you go in: it happens to everyone. - Palm straight, vertical. Not on top of theirs, which comes across as a power move, and not underneath. - A full grip, with your whole hand, not just your fingertips. - Firm pressure but never painful, about what you'd use to open a heavy door. - Two or three pumps, then let go. A handshake that never ends makes people uncomfortable. - Eye contact and, if it comes naturally, a smile.

Avoid pulling the other person toward you or covering their hand with your free hand unless you know each other well: many people experience those gestures as intrusive, and in the next chapter we'll see why.

And if the other person doesn't want to shake hands? That's perfectly fine. A nod, a smile, and your name said clearly do the same job.

Speaking Up in Meetings

Back to Gavin. He was right, but nobody listened. Here's what he could have worked on, in order of importance.

Voice. In the chapter on the voice, you saw that slightly lower voices are perceived as more authoritative (Casey Klofstad and colleagues, 2012). It's not about changing your voice, it's about not letting nerves push it up. Two adjustments: speak a touch more slowly than comes naturally, and let your pitch drop at the end of statements. "There's a problem with the stairs." With a period, not a question mark.

Pauses. Tense people fill every second. People at ease leave room. A one-second pause before the key point grabs more attention than a raised voice. And once you've said it, stop. Don't tack on three explanations in a row: silence gets other people's minds working.

Apologizing up front. "Sorry, this might be a dumb point," "I don't know if this matters, but..." These are words, but the body always comes along with them: shoulders rising, eyes dropping, hands hiding. Cut them. Start straight with the point.

Hands. Keep them on the table, in view. Let them move while you talk, the way they do when you're chatting with friends over coffee. The gestures that go with your words help you find your sentences and help others follow you. What matters is that they're yours, not memorized.

Eye contact. Don't talk to your notes and don't talk only to the boss. Look at people one at a time, a few seconds each, the way you do when you tell a story at dinner. And when you're done, look at the person who needs to respond.

Space. Back against the chair, torso upright, elbows on the table or close to it. You don't need to puff yourself up. You just need to stop shrinking.

And if someone interrupts you? Don't raise your voice. Lift one hand slightly, palm open, and say calmly: "Let me finish, and then it's all yours." Then actually finish, in a few sentences. The open hand stops the other person without attacking them, and your calm voice does the rest.

Listening with your body. In meetings you spend far more time listening than talking, and your body is at work there too. Whoever is speaking can tell right away whether you're following: torso turned toward them, eyes coming back often to their face, a few slow nods, phone face down. The opposite (eyes on the screen, torso turned away, pen tapping) lands as a small "I'm not interested," even when that's not what you think. There's a practical payoff: people who feel listened to tend to listen in return. When your turn comes, you'll find people more willing to follow you.

The right distance. In the chapter on distance, you saw how much the space between people matters. You don't need to get too close to be heard: people who invade someone's space get attention, but it's alarmed attention. If you need to talk to a coworker at their desk, stop a step away, don't lean over their shoulder, and if it's going to be a long conversation, ask if you can pull up a chair. Getting on the same level says "we're talking as equals," and it's the fastest way to be taken seriously without putting anyone on the defensive.

All these adjustments are about what you do in front of other people. But what about what you do beforehand, when nobody's watching, to psych yourself up? This is where we have to reckon with the most famous and most debated study of the last twenty years.

Power Posing: What Survived

In 2010, Dana Carney, Amy Cuddy, and Andy Yap published a study that went around the world. They asked volunteers to hold "power poses" for two minutes (sitting with their feet on the desk and their hands behind their head, or standing and leaning forward with their hands spread wide on a table) or else closed, contracted poses. The famous hands-on-hips Wonder Woman pose came later, with Cuddy's

talks. Three results were reported: people who had held the open pose felt more powerful, were more willing to take risks, and showed different levels of two hormones, more testosterone and less cortisol, the stress hormone.

Two minutes of posture to change your body chemistry: an irresistible idea. It became one of the most-watched talks of all time and ended up in hundreds of corporate training courses.

Then came the replications. In 2015, Eva Ranehill and colleagues reran the experiment with about 200 people, far more than the original study. The hormones didn't change. Neither did risk-taking. Only one thing remained: people said they felt a little more powerful.

In 2016, Dana Carney herself, the study's first author, stated publicly that she no longer believed the effects of power posing were real. That's a rare move in science, and it deserves respect.

In 2018, Amy Cuddy, with Jack Schultz and Nathan Fosse, reexamined the published studies on the subject. The conclusion, scaled back considerably, is that open postures have an effect on the subjective feeling of power and confidence. On hormones and behavior, nothing solid.

So what's left for you? - Not the hormones. Two minutes with your feet planted wide in the office restroom won't change your chemistry. - The feeling, a little: an upright, comfortable posture can give you a touch more confidence. - The real reason posture matters is something else: other people see it. A closed, hunched body sends a signal of discomfort to whoever is watching, whatever is going on inside you.

Use it for what it is: a small boost, not magic. Before an interview, instead of sitting in the waiting room with your head bent over your phone, choose a comfortable position, back against the chair, slow breathing. It won't change your life. It'll help you walk in a little better.

Matching Words and Body

In the introduction, you saw what Albert Mehrabian's experiments (1971) really said, far from the myth of the magic numbers: when

words and body don't agree, we tend to believe the body. Now flip the point of view. This time, the body that disagrees with the words could be yours.

That's why the shortest route to coming across as confident is often the simplest one: tell the truth about how you feel. If you're shaking inside and you say "I'm totally relaxed" or "Everything is completely under control" with your jaw clenched and your voice tight, you create a false note that other people pick up on right away, even if they couldn't explain it. If you say "This project really matters to me, so I'm a little nervous," your words and your body line up again. And the people listening usually relax along with you.

The same goes for difficult messages. If you need to say no, say it with a body that says no: steady, voice dropping, no apologetic smile. A "no" said with a laugh and raised shoulders sounds like a "maybe," and it will be treated as one. How to handle the emotion while you say it is another story: we cover it in the companion book, *Emotional Control*.

IN PRACTICE

Rebecca's Raise

Rebecca is forty-seven and has been a bookkeeper for eleven years at a small furniture company outside the city. She has decided to ask the owner, Mr. Coleman, for a raise. Last year she had tried in the hallway, by the coffee machine, laughing and practically apologizing: "So, maybe someday we could think about me too, huh?" The owner had laughed along with her, and that was the end of it.

This year Rebecca prepares her body too, not just her words.

First: territory. No hallway. The day before, she asks for a meeting in the owner's office: "I'd like fifteen minutes with you tomorrow." The message is already in the way she asks.

Second: the entrance. Before she knocks, she takes a slow breath. She walks in, pauses for a moment, says hello first, and waits for the owner

to point her to a chair. She sits with her back against the chair, feet flat on the floor, the folder on the desk and her hands resting on it.

Third: the voice. She rehearsed her opening line at home, out loud, with her daughter playing the owner. She noticed that when she's nervous, her voice goes up at the end. So she repeated the line until her pitch came down on its own: "I'm here to talk about my salary."

Fourth: silence. She lays out three reasons (the new clients she handles, the switch to the new accounting software, which she managed, and her overtime over the past year), then she names the figure. And she stops talking. It's the hardest part. The owner leans back in his chair, touches the back of his neck, looks down at the desk. Rebecca feels the urge to add, "But if that's too much, we could..." She doesn't. She keeps her hands still on the desk and waits.

Fifth: she reads his responses. The owner says, "Well, it's a tough time right now." But right after that, he asks, "And when would you want it to start?" Rebecca recognizes the signal: the question has moved from "if" to "how." She answers calmly, without letting a relieved smile slip out too soon.

She doesn't get the full amount. She gets part of it right away and the rest starting in January.

Rebecca didn't put on an act. She was nervous, and the owner probably noticed. But this time her body didn't say the opposite of her words. And for the first time, she didn't have to apologize for asking.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

Copying a "boss" body instead of removing the signals of discomfort. People who discover body language often overdo it: they spread their legs wide, crush every hand they shake, stare at others without ever looking away, take up two chairs with their arms. The result isn't authority. It's a body that looks like it's at war, and other people read it as aggressive, fake, or worse, as insecurity in disguise.

Think of the people you most admire for their presence. They're almost never the ones who puff themselves up. They're the ones who stay still, listen, speak without hurrying, and don't need to prove anything.

How to avoid it: before you walk into a meeting or an interview, don't ask yourself, "What gesture should I make to look strong?" Ask yourself: "Which habit makes me look less sure of myself than I am?" Drop that one, and leave the rest alone. What's left is your natural way of being with other people, just cleaner.

EXERCISE

The two-minute video. Do it this week, with your phone.

1. Pick a topic you know well (your job, a recipe, a game you watched) and record yourself explaining it for two minutes, as if you were talking to a coworker. Frame yourself from at least the waist up.
2. Watch the video with the sound off. Note what your hands do, where your eyes go, what your shoulders do. Three lines are enough.
3. Listen to the audio only, without watching. Note your pace, whether your voice rises at the end of sentences, and how many times you fill silences with "um" or "like."
4. Choose just one thing to change. One.
5. Redo the recording every day for five days, two minutes each time, working only on that one thing.
6. On the sixth day, compare the first video with the last. Then choose the next thing.

Watching and hearing yourself bothers everyone at first: your recorded voice always sounds strange, and every little tic jumps out at you. Resist the temptation to delete it all: those two minutes will tell you more about yourself than ten how-to books.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- You don't need a "winning" body to copy: you need to remove the signals of discomfort that don't help you.
- First impressions form in a few moments: pay attention to your entrance, your greeting, and your first words.
- In meetings: a voice that drops at the end of sentences, pauses, hands in view, no apologizing up front.
- Power posing doesn't change your hormones: all that's left is a small effect on how confident you feel.
- When words and body don't match, people believe the body: honesty brings them back in line.
- One thing at a time, practiced until it becomes natural.

When the Body Becomes a Weapon

Tuesday morning, an apartment building across town. The intercom buzzes: “Good morning, we’re checking gas and electric bills.” Walter, seventy-two, retired, opens his front door.

On the landing stands a young man of about twenty-five, blue vest, ID badge around his neck, big smile. Before Walter can say anything, the young man has already stepped forward: one foot on the doormat, his shoulder almost inside the door. He touches Walter’s arm: “It’ll only take a minute, sir, it’s to save you money.”

He talks fast. He smiles without a break. He nods while Walter talks, as if they already agreed on everything. When Walter crosses his arms, a few seconds later the young man crosses his arms. When Walter leans against the doorframe, he leans against the other side.

“Could I just take a quick look at your last bill?”

Three minutes later Walter has the bill in his hand, the young man is photographing it with his phone and handing him a form to sign, “just for the verification.” Walter stops because the house phone rings: it’s his granddaughter. When he comes back to the door, the young man is already at the neighbor’s.

That evening his granddaughter explains that the form was a new contract, with a different supplier.

Walter is no pushover. He worked forty years in a factory, served as a union rep, and negotiated with managers far tougher than a kid in a vest. And yet, on his own doorstep, something worked faster than his head.

That something was the body. His, and the young man's.

The Body as Leverage

Everything you've read in this book is meant to help you read other people. But the same mechanisms can be used in reverse: not to understand people, but to push them.

Remember the emotional brain from Chapter 1? It reacts before reasoning does: it freezes, it wants to flee, it stiffens. And it relaxes when it receives signals of comfort. Manipulators work at exactly this level, and they have two roads: - create discomfort, so you give in just to make it stop (intimidation); - create a fake comfort, so you lower your guard (fake openness, mirroring, the friendly touch).

Often they use both, alternating them. And almost always they add a third ingredient: haste. The body is never the only tool, but it serves one precise purpose: to keep you from thinking.

The key point of this chapter is simple, and it's the cluster rule applied to self-defense. A single signal proves nothing. The coworker standing next to your desk isn't intimidating you; the friendly salesperson isn't a con artist. What counts is the combination: strong body signals, haste, a request. When you see all three together, stop.

Intimidation: Space, Height, Gaze

Physical intimidation doesn't need blows or threats. Space is enough.

Invading distance. In the chapter on distance, you saw the zones described by Edward Hall (1966). People who intimidate step into your personal distance uninvited and stay there. They move closer as they talk, force you to back up, put your back against the wall, sometimes literally.

Using height. Staying on their feet while you're in your chair. Sitting on the edge of your desk. Leaning over you while you look at your screen. Resting their hands on both sides of your chair. These are positions that make the person underneath feel tiny.

Blocking the exits. Standing between you and the door. Closing the office door with a slow movement. Parking so that you can't get out. The message, never spoken aloud, is: you're not leaving until I say so.

The crushing stare. In the chapter on the eyes, you saw the difference between looking and staring. A gaze used to dominate doesn't break away, blinks little, doesn't smile. It often comes with a long silence after you've spoken, as if what you said didn't deserve an answer.

Volume and rhythm. Suddenly raising the voice, or dropping it to an icy whisper. Talking over you. Slapping a hand on the table. These are ways to set off your internal alarm. And when the emotional brain is on alert, reasoning slows down.

All of this happens at work (the boss who yells, the manager who calls you into the room and shuts the door), in couples, in families, in stores. It doesn't matter whether the person on the other side is a man or a woman, young or old: the mechanism is the same.

One important line. If physical intimidation happens at home or in a relationship, if you're afraid of the person you live with, this is no longer a body language issue. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233), free and open around the clock, or reach out to a professional. This isn't something to face without help.

Fake Comfort: Openness, Mirroring, Touch

The most effective techniques don't frighten you. They reassure you. They travel through three channels: staged openness, imitation of your mannerisms, physical contact.

Fake Openness and Fake Calm

Paul Ekman, in *Telling Lies* (1985), distinguished two ways of deceiving with the face: concealing an emotion you feel and showing one you

don't feel. Fake openness is the second road, extended to the whole body. Palms clearly visible, a big smile, open arms, a friendly tone. These are all signals of comfort, and your emotional brain reads them as "this person can be trusted."

How do you tell real openness from the staged kind? Never from a single signal. But some inconsistencies come up often: - a smile that doesn't reach the eyes and never changes, whatever you say (you read about the genuine smile in the chapter on the face); - rigid openness: palms on display, but tense shoulders and a stiff neck; - calm that doesn't crack even in the face of an awkward question, when anyone would show at least a moment of surprise; - the person's calm next to the hurry of their requests: they're relaxed, you have to decide right now.

The last point is the most revealing. Someone who is genuinely calm isn't in a rush for you to sign, pay, or say yes. A calm that's put on display while living alongside constant urgency is a script, not a state of mind.

Be careful with the reverse, though: calm, on its own, is not a sign of deception. Some people are calm by nature, and some professionals are used to tough questions. Always go back to the baseline and to the cluster of signals.

Forced Mirroring

When two people get along, they tend to imitate each other without realizing it: posture, gestures, the rhythm of their voice. Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh (1999) called it the chameleon effect, and showed that people who are subtly imitated find the other person more likable (you read about it in the chapter on interest and attraction).

This natural mechanism has been taken and turned into a sales technique. William Maddux, Elizabeth Mullen, and Adam Galinsky (2008) observed that, in simulated negotiations, people who subtly imitated the other side's mannerisms closed more deals. Many sales courses teach it: copy the customer's posture, use their words, match your pace to theirs.

Mirroring in itself isn't a fault. We all do it, every day, without meaning to. It becomes a manipulation tool when it's used to manufacture, in a hurry, a trust that isn't there, in order to get something.

There's good news: it only works until you notice. Jeremy Bailenson and colleagues (2008) had volunteers talk with a virtual character that imitated their head movements with a delay of a few seconds. People who noticed the imitation rated the character less favorably. A chameleon that gets spotted loses its advantage.

How to notice: - the other person takes on your posture, always a few seconds later, every time; - they repeat your exact words, even unusual ones; - if you change position sharply (you cross your arms, you lean back), within a few seconds they do it too.

If it happens once, it's normal rapport. If it happens every time, and a request is on its way, it's a method. The defense is simple: the feeling that "we're on the same wavelength" proves nothing. It can be manufactured in ten minutes. Real trust is built with facts, and it takes time.

The Commanding Touch

Touch is the body's most powerful signal, because it skips over distance and goes straight to the emotional brain.

April Crusco and Christopher Wetzel (1984) studied waitresses in two restaurants: when they briefly brushed a customer's hand or shoulder while handing back the change, they received bigger tips. They called it "the Midas touch." A light, almost imperceptible contact was enough to make people more generous.

If such a small touch can weigh on a tip, imagine what it can do in a negotiation, in a relationship, in an office.

In the chapter on the hands, you saw Nancy Henley's idea: touch often follows hierarchy. The boss pats the employee on the shoulder; the reverse rarely happens. Manipulators exploit exactly this asymmetry: touching you without asking is a silent way of saying who's in charge, and it puts you in an awkward position, because returning or rejecting the gesture would seem over the top.

Touches to watch carefully: - the hand on your back that “guides” you where you haven’t decided to go; - the pat on the shoulder from above while you’re in your chair; - the handshake that pulls you in or won’t let go; - the hand on your arm that stays there while a request arrives; - the touch that increases right after you’ve said no.

The criterion is simple. A respectful touch withdraws if you withdraw. A touch used to command comes back, insists, or increases. And an unwanted touch, repeated after you’ve made it clear you don’t like it, is no longer a body language issue: it’s a lack of respect, and in some cases something more serious.

Aggressive Salespeople and Street Scammers

On the street, the body is a scammer’s main tool, because they have very little time to act.

Frank Stajano and Paul Wilson (2011) studied the most common scams and identified seven principles that keep recurring. Three of them concern the body directly: - distraction: keeping your attention busy (a map under your nose, a bracelet tied around your wrist, a question) while something else is happening; - the herd: several people pretending not to know each other who surround you, or fake winners who make you believe everything is above board; - time: not giving you a chance to think.

You probably know the most common scripts: the “free” bracelet tied around your wrist before you can say no; the fake petition with the clipboard pushed into your hands; the shell game with accomplices who keep winning; the fake technician; the door-to-door salesperson like the one at Walter’s door.

The physical patterns all look alike: - they put an object in your hand (a pen, a sheet of paper, a bracelet), and holding something already creates a small sense of commitment; - they cut across your path, plant themselves in front of you as you walk; - they touch you right away, before any introduction; - they surround you, two or three of them; - they talk fast and ask questions that are easy to answer yes to.

You don't need to distrust everyone who stops you on the street. You need to recognize the combination: contact, an object in your hand, haste.

The Four Moves to Defend Yourself

Noticing is half the work. The other half is knowing what to do. Four simple moves that work almost every time.

1. Put the distance back. Take a step back. Remove the hand from your arm. Give back the object they put in your hand. Stand up if the other person is towering over you. No need to explain: the body puts the space back in order even before words do.

2. Break the rhythm. A manipulator needs the conversation to flow fast, in their direction. Interrupt: "Hold on a second." Ask an off-script question. Change position. Look at your watch. Every interruption gives time back to your reasoning.

3. Buy time. "Let me think about it and get back to you." "I'll talk it over at home." "Leave me the flyer, I'll call." An honest offer survives a night of thinking it over. If they tell you the offer is only good right now, you already have your answer.

4. Leave. Close the door, walk away, end the call. You don't owe anyone anything: not an explanation, not a polite answer, not a justified no. Leaving isn't rude. It's your right to decide where you stand.

These moves work because they change the terrain. Someone who uses the body as a weapon is playing on your instinct; you respond by bringing the situation back to a level where you can think. How to handle the fear or anger that rises in those moments is the subject of the companion book, *Emotional Control*.

IN PRACTICE

The New Manager

Adam, thirty-three, has worked for six years in the purchasing department of a food company outside the city. In September a new manager arrives, Danielle, in her fifties, energetic, with a long career at a big corporation behind her.

The first few weeks are friendly. Then Adam starts to notice a pattern. When she wants him to take on extra work, Danielle doesn't call him into her office. She comes to his desk and sits on the edge of it, above him, her hip almost on the keyboard. She talks down to him, smiling, with a hand on his shoulder. "You're the best, Adam. I know you can get it done by Friday."

When Adam tries to object, the hand stays on his shoulder and so does the smile, but her gaze turns fixed and doesn't let go. Silence. Adam feels his throat tighten and ends up saying: "Okay, I'll try." She gives him two little pats on the shoulder and walks off.

One evening Adam goes back over those scenes with the tools from this book. The cluster is clear: height (her above, him in his chair), territory (his desk taken over), a touch that stays, a fixed smile, a gaze that hardens as soon as disagreement appears, haste (always "by Friday"), and a request. It isn't an isolated episode: it happens every time there's something uncomfortable to ask. And with his other coworkers, the scene repeats itself exactly.

Adam doesn't need to know whether Danielle does it on purpose or whether it's a habit picked up over years in tough offices. It's enough for him to know that this script pushes him to say yes before he's had time to think.

The next time, he tries the four moves. When Danielle sits on the edge of his desk, Adam stands up: "Hang on, let me stand, it's easier to talk." Now they're at the same height, and the hand on his shoulder has slid away on its own. When the request comes, Adam asks an off-script question: "If I do this, what gets pushed back? The work for the

German supplier?" For a moment she stiffens. Then Adam buys time: "Let me check my calendar. I'll email you within the hour."

The answer by email is a yes, but with a condition: the work for the German supplier slips by a week. Danielle accepts without arguing.

Not everything changed in a day. But Adam stopped making decisions with a tight throat.

THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE

Waiting to be certain before you act.

Faced with a situation that makes them uncomfortable, many people think: "Maybe I'm overreacting, maybe they don't mean it, I don't want to seem rude." And they stay put. They listen, they smile, they sign.

The problem is that you'll almost never know for sure whether the other person is manipulating you or is just pushy, rushed, or clumsy. This book has told you in every chapter: the body doesn't give certainties, it gives clues.

But you don't need certainty to protect yourself. The four moves don't accuse anyone. Taking a step back, interrupting, buying time, leaving: these are gestures that cost very little if the other person is acting in good faith, and that save you if they aren't. Honest people are happy to wait until tomorrow. Only someone who needs your haste gets irritated when you take it away.

So don't ask yourself "Are they manipulating me?" Ask yourself: "Do I feel pushed to decide right now?" If the answer is yes, buy time anyway.

EXERCISE

The four moves, practiced before you need them. Do this during the week.

1. On a sheet of paper, write three phrases for buying time that sound natural to you. For example: "Let me think about it and call you back," "I'll talk it over at home," "Send me everything in writing." Learn them by heart.
2. With someone you trust, rehearse the scene: they move in too close and rush you, you take a step back and say one of your phrases. Repeat three times, until the step back comes naturally.
3. Over the next few days, watch a salesperson (at a market, in a store, on the phone) and count: how many times do they rush the customer? Do they touch the customer? Do they put something in the customer's hand?
4. Think of a person in your life you often say yes to and then regret it. Write down what their body does in those moments: distance, height, gaze, touch, rhythm.
5. Choose which of the four moves you'll use the next time with that person. Just one.
6. Once you've used it, write two lines about how it went. It doesn't have to be perfect: what counts is that you did it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Manipulators use the body to create discomfort (intimidation) or fake comfort (openness, mirroring, touch).
- The warning sign is the combination: strong body signals, haste, a request.
- Touch and mirroring used to command keep insisting even when you pull back.
- The four moves: put the distance back, break the rhythm, buy time, leave.
- You don't need certainty to protect yourself: it's enough to notice you're being pushed to decide right now.

Parting Words: Watch with Respect

We've reached the end. We've covered the feet, the torso, the hands, the face, the eyes, the voice, distance, lying, interest, work, your own body, and the body of anyone who tries to use theirs against you. It's time to put everything back in its place.

Remember the study by Charles Bond and Bella DePaulo (2006)? Putting together more than two hundred studies, they found that people recognize lies only a little better than chance. No book, not even this one, turns you into a lie detector. What you can become is something more useful: a person who notices. Who sees when something changes. Who asks one more question instead of passing one more judgment.

The four rules from the introduction hold until the last page: the baseline, clusters of signals, context, changes. If you forget them, body language becomes a horoscope. If you use them, it becomes a tool.

And there's one more thing, which isn't a rule but an attitude. Behind every signal there's a person. The coworker with crossed arms may just be cold. The young man who won't look you in the eye may just be shy. The customer who touches their neck may simply be afraid of spending too much of the family's money. Reading the body is about

understanding others better, not unmasking them. It's about asking yourself "What's going on?" before you think "Gotcha."

Use what you've learned with the same care you'd want for yourself. Observe calmly, judge late, ask often. Protect yourself when you need to, without suspecting everyone.

The body doesn't lie. But it tells its story in fragments, and it's up to you to listen all the way to the end.

The 100-Signal Quick Reference

This quick reference gathers in one place the signals you've met throughout the book, zone by zone: feet and legs, torso and shoulders, arms and hands, face, eyes, voice, distance and territory. It's designed to be checked on the fly: before a meeting, after a date, when something in a conversation doesn't add up and you want to go over what to look for.

Each row has three columns: "Signal," described in a few words; "What It May Mean," which is the most common reading; and the most important column, "Watch Out For," with the mundane explanations and false alarms to rule out before you draw any conclusion.

Notice the verb: "may mean." No row in this table says "means." On its own, a signal is a weak clue. It only becomes interesting when it passes the four rules from the Introduction: it's different from that person's baseline, it arrives as part of a cluster with other signals pointing the same way, it makes sense in context, and it's a change that showed up at a specific moment, usually right after a sentence or a question.

Two practical warnings. First: where the reading was uncertain, we chose the most cautious one. Better a signal read with caution than a person judged unfairly. Second: none of these rows tells you whether someone is lying. There is no "lie gesture." At most, these signals tell you that something touched the person at that moment: comfort, discomfort, interest, tension. The why has to be discovered with questions, not guessed.

Use it as a dictionary, not as an oracle.

Feet and Legs

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
1	Feet pointing toward the exit	Wanting to go; for them, the conversation is over	A real commitment waiting for them; what counts is whether the direction has changed from before
2	Feet turning toward you	Interest, openness, engagement	In tight spaces, feet go wherever there's room
3	"Happy feet" that bounce or move cheerfully	Enthusiasm, good news, eagerness to get going	Some people's feet are always moving: compare with the baseline
4	Foot tapping or leg jiggling while seated	Impatience, tension, excess energy	Often just a habit; what counts is when it starts or changes pace
5	Leg that suddenly goes still	Freeze: a heavy topic has come up	It may just be concentration on what they're hearing
6	Legs crossed while standing	Feeling at ease and safe with the people around them	Fatigue, the way they're leaning, uncomfortable shoes
7	Legs crossed toward you, while seated	Openness, liking	Many people always cross their legs the same way
8	Legs uncrossing and turning the other way	Discomfort, pulling away	A simple change of position after a while

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
9	Feet pulled back under the chair	Tension, closing off, a need to protect oneself	Low chair, cold, little room
10	Ankles locked or feet hooked around the chair legs	Restrained tension, self-control	A common posture in anyone who sits for a long time
11	Nervous kick of the toe, with legs crossed	Annoyance at what they're hearing	For many people it's just a habitual rhythm
12	Legs wide and planted on the ground	Taking up space, confidence, sometimes a challenge	Comfort, build, clothing, type of chair
13	Heels lifting, rocking up on the toes	Enthusiasm, positive thoughts	Impatience, for example in line at the post office or the checkout
14	Hands on the knees and torso forward, ready to stand up	Wanting to wrap up the meeting	For some people it's just the way they usually sit

Torso and Shoulders

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
15	Torso leaning toward you	Interest, engagement	A noisy setting; they lean in to hear better
16	Torso pulling away	Discomfort, disagreement, a need for distance	A comfy chair back, fatigue, the end of the day
17	Torso turned sideways while the face looks at you	Partial detachment, ventral denial: the torso “denies” what the face grants	A position forced by the table, the chairs, or the room
18	Bag, cushion, or folder held tight in front of the stomach	A need for protection	Cold, habit, belongings to keep safe
19	Sudden barrier after a remark (a jacket getting buttoned, a coffee cup or bag placed in between)	Closing off in response to what was just said	Cold, tidying the table; what counts is whether it appears right after a touchy subject
20	Shoulders rising toward the ears (the turtle effect)	Uncertainty, wanting to hide	Cold, muscle tension, back pain
21	Quick shrug of just one shoulder	Little conviction in what they’re saying	It may just be a habitual “I dunno”
22	Shoulders dropping, torso slumping	Giving up, discouragement	Physical tiredness, sleepiness, feeling unwell

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
23	Chest swelling, posture growing taller	Confidence, pride, sometimes a challenge	A deep breath after exertion
24	Posture deflating after some news	Disappointment, taking a hit	Relief: tension melting away deflates the body too
25	Breath held, or high in the chest	Alarm, tension	Asthma, having just climbed stairs, physical exertion
26	Torso turning toward the door	Wanting to leave	Someone coming in, a noise, expecting someone

Arms and Hands

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
27	Crossed arms	More often cold or comfort; sometimes closing off	What counts is when they appear and what comes with them
28	Arms crossed tight, hands gripping the arms	Tension, a need to hold oneself together	Intense cold
29	Arms pulled in close to the body	Discomfort, wanting to be noticed less	Tight space, cold
30	Arms spread across the backs of nearby chairs	Ease, owning the space, sometimes dominance	Normal among friends and family
31	Hands hidden in pockets or under the table	Discomfort or reserve	Cold, habit, dirty or rough hands

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
32	Steepling, fingertips touching	Confidence in what they're saying	A gesture learned by people who often speak in public
33	Thumbs on display (out of the pockets, on the lapels)	Confidence, sometimes for show	Fashion and habit
34	Thumbs hidden, in the pockets or inside the fist	Insecurity, feeling low in status	Cold
35	Hands wringing or squeezing each other	Tension, worry	Cold hands, joint pain
36	Palms rubbed on the thighs	Pacifying behavior, nervousness	Hands sweaty from the heat
37	Hand to the neck or to the dip at the base of the throat	Discomfort, insecurity, feeling threatened	An itch, a necklace, a tight collar
38	Rubbing the forehead or the back of the neck	Stress, cognitive load	A real headache, a stiff neck
39	Fiddling with a pen, ring, or phone	A need to calm down, or boredom	A habit for many people; see whether it increases after a question
40	Gestures that go with the words	Engagement, involvement in what they're telling	They vary a lot from person to person and region to region
41	Gestures that suddenly disappear	Caution, holding back, mental effort	Fatigue or a sensitive topic; it isn't proof of a lie
42	Clenched fists	Suppressed anger, tension	Cold, exertion, habit

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
43	Fingers drumming on the table	Impatience, boredom	Thinking to a beat, a song stuck in their head
44	Touch on the arm during the conversation	Closeness, warmth, sometimes a wish to steer the other person	It varies by culture and family; a touch repeated after you step back should be taken seriously

Face

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
45	Smile that reaches the eyes (cheeks lifting, crinkles at the corners)	Genuine joy, the Duchenne smile	Some people can produce it on purpose; tired people smile less with their eyes
46	Smile with the mouth only	Politeness, a social smile	It isn't fakeness: it's good manners
47	Smile that appears and vanishes abruptly	A forced smile, put on for the occasion	Shyness, embarrassment
48	Lip compression, lips pressed until they disappear	Something unwelcome, holding back from saying something	Concentration, dry lips
49	One corner of the mouth pulled to one side	Contempt, condescension	A tic or a natural asymmetry of the face
50	Wrinkled nose	Disgust, rejection	A real smell

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
51	Eyebrows lowered and drawn together	Anger, or concentration and effort	Bright light, vision problems
52	Eyebrows raised and drawn together in the middle	Sadness, worry	On some faces it's the resting shape
53	Eyebrows raised, eyes wide, mouth open, for an instant	Surprise	Real surprise is brief; if it lingers, it's often put on
54	Eyes wide, lower lids tense, lips pulled back	Fear	Surprise, straining to see
55	Microexpression, a flash of emotion lasting a fraction of a second	A hidden or unacknowledged emotion	It tells you which emotion, not the reason: it doesn't prove a lie
56	Clenched jaw, tense cheek muscles	Suppressed anger, tension	A habit of clenching the teeth
57	Biting the lips or the inside of the cheeks	Tension, hesitation	Habit, chapped lips
58	Chin lifting	Confidence, challenge, superiority	A height difference between the people involved
59	Chin dropping toward the chest	Dejection, submission, shame	Reading something, cold
60	Face flushing or going pale	Strong emotion: embarrassment, anger, fear	Heat, cold, blood pressure, alcohol

Eyes

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
61	Pupils dilating	Interest, attention, mental effort	Light matters much more: in a dim restaurant, everyone's pupils dilate
62	Blink rate speeding up	Stress, tension, effort	Contact lenses, dry air, fatigue
63	Eyes closed for a long moment or covered with a hand	Eye blocking: shutting out something they'd rather not see or hear	Fatigue, concentration
64	Gaze that avoids yours	Thinking, shyness, embarrassment, respect	It isn't a sign of lying
65	Looking up while thinking	Searching for a memory or a word	The "up and to the right" myth has been debunked: it doesn't tell true from made up
66	Fixed stare that doesn't let go	Intense interest, or an attempt to dominate	For some people it's their normal way of listening
67	Eyebrow flash (the brows lift for an instant)	Recognition, greeting, pleasure at seeing you	It's also used to stress a word
68	Narrowed eyes	Doubt, sizing something up, annoyance	Sun, nearsightedness, fatigue

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
69	Repeated glances at the clock or the door	Wanting to leave	They're waiting for someone or have a train to catch
70	After a joke, the eyes look for someone in the group	A bond or a hierarchy: people look at whoever matters	It may just be the closest friend
71	Watery eyes	Being moved, sadness	Allergies, wind, fatigue
72	Long, soft gaze with a smile	Interest, warmth, sometimes attraction	It isn't consent: the words are what count
73	On a video call, eyes scanning across the screen	Attention dropping: reading a chat or an email	Checking notes or data that are useful for the meeting

Voice

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
74	Pitch higher than usual	Tension, excitement, stress	It also rises with joy and with fatigue
75	Lower, calmer voice	Confidence, control	The control may be an act
76	Volume going up	Engagement, anger, a need to win out	A noisy setting, hearing problems
77	Volume dropping	Insecurity, a sensitive topic, sharing a confidence	Fatigue, a sore throat
78	Pace speeding up	Enthusiasm, anxiety, wanting to get off the topic	Some people always talk fast

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
79	Pace slowing, lots of pauses	Searching for words, mental effort, caution	Honest reflection on a serious question
80	Long pause before a simple answer	Hesitation, effort	An unclear question, distraction, a slow connection
81	Nervous, out-of-place laugh	Discomfort, embarrassment	A habit for some people
82	Clearing the throat before answering	Tension, a throat gone dry from stress	A cold, a genuinely dry throat
83	Uptalk: the voice rises at the end of a statement, as if it were a question	Insecurity, looking for reassurance	A regional accent or a habit: compare with the baseline
84	Voice cracking	Strong emotion	A tired voice after hours of work
85	Very short answers to open-ended questions	Closing off, little desire to talk	A person of few words: check the baseline
86	Sudden silence after a question	Thinking, discomfort, caution	Silence isn't proof: give them time

Distance and Territory

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
87	Gets very close, inside your personal distance	Familiarity, or intrusion	Crowds, culture, family habits
88	Steps back when you move closer	Needs more space, discomfort	Different tastes in distance: respect them
89	Moves away during the conversation	Interest dropping, discomfort	Space, noise, someone walking by
90	The distance shrinks little by little	Growing trust, interest	The room filling up
91	Sits at the head of the table or in the boss's chair	Status, a wish to lead	The only free seat, a habit from home
92	Sits beside you instead of across from you	Cooperation, closeness	The room's layout leaves no choice
93	Stays on the other side of the desk	Formal roles, professional distance	It's normal in an office
94	Puts their things in your space (phone, documents)	Familiarity, or expanding their territory	A small table
95	Leans on your desk or your car	Familiarity, or a show of power	Fatigue, habit
96	Stands over you while you're in your chair	Pressure, dominance	Being in a hurry, not enough chairs

No.	Signal	What It May Mean	Watch Out For
97	Stands in front of the door or blocks the way	Pressure, control	A tight space: see whether they move when you ask
98	Always takes the same spot	A sense of territory	A reassuring habit, not necessarily power
99	As soon as they arrive, spreads their things over chairs and table (jacket, bag, keys, folder)	Settling in, taking possession of the space	Their hands are full; see whether they also invade other people's space
100	Hand on your back to steer you, or body placed between you and the exit	Control, guidance you didn't ask for	Etiquette or a crowded place; what counts is whether they respect you stepping back

A hundred signals is a lot, but there's only one rule for using them well: observe quietly, look for clusters, and always check with a straightforward question before you draw conclusions.

30 Days to Train Your Eye

Reading the body is like learning a language: you can grasp the rules in one evening, but the eye is trained in the field. This appendix gives you one exercise a day for thirty days. Ten or fifteen minutes are enough, fitted into the life you already lead: at the coffee shop on your corner, at the office, over dinner, in line at the post office, in front of the TV.

The program is divided into four weeks. The first trains the most important and most neglected skill: the baseline. The second works on the body, from the feet to the hands. The third, on face and voice. The last one, a little longer, takes everything into real situations: job interviews, meetings, stores, negotiations, defending yourself.

All you need is a notebook, or a note on your phone, to use every day. Writing is half the exercise: it forces you to separate what you saw from what you imagined.

Three rules for the whole month. First: observe discreetly. No one should feel stared at or studied; if someone notices and gets uncomfortable, stop. Second: describe before you interpret. “She touched her neck twice” comes before “She was nervous.” Third: no final verdicts. These exercises train your eye; they’re not for unmasking anyone. The book’s four rules (baseline, clusters, context, changes) remain the frame for every single day.

If you skip a day, no problem: pick up from the last page you wrote in your notebook, not from the calendar.

Week 1. The Baseline

This is the least spectacular week and the most important one. Without a baseline, every signal is an opinion; with a baseline, it becomes information. For seven days you won't be looking for anything hidden: you'll simply learn what "normal" looks like for the people around you.

Day 1. Three People from Memory

Choose three people you see often: a coworker, a family member, the barista at the coffee shop on your corner. Without looking at them, write down for each one how they talk, how much they gesture, how they sit or stand, how much eye contact they make. You'll discover how little you remember about people you see every day. That's your starting point.

Day 2. Ten Minutes with One Person

Pick one of the three and watch them for ten minutes at a calm moment, when nothing is at stake. Note how fast they talk, how much they gesture, where their hands usually rest, how much their feet move. Compare with what you wrote yesterday: what had you forgotten, and what had you imagined?

Day 3. Describe Without Judging

At a coffee shop or standing in line, watch a stranger for two minutes. Write down only what you see, the way a camera would: "touches the glass three times," "checks the phone every few seconds." Words like "nervous," "bored," and "happy" are off-limits. It's harder than it sounds, and it's the foundation of everything.

Day 4. First Impressions, in Writing

When you meet someone new, or see a stranger being interviewed on TV, write down your first impression in one line. Then, after a full conversation or the whole interview, read it again. Remember Willis

and Todorov: judgment forms in an instant. Today you check how well it holds up.

Day 5. The Dinner Table

At dinner with family or friends, pick one person. Watch how they change when their favorite topic comes up, and when a topic comes up that bores them or makes them uncomfortable. Note what shifts: voice, torso, hands, gaze. You're seeing changes from the baseline.

Day 6. False Alarms

Make a list of the habitual gestures of the people close to you: the jiggling leg, the crossed arms, the little laugh, the nose touch. For those people, these gestures mean nothing, because they're always there. This list protects you from the most common mistakes.

Day 7. The Profiles

Reread the week. For each of the three people from Day 1, write a five-line baseline profile: voice, gestures, posture, gaze, habits. Keep the profiles in your notebook: you'll need them in the coming weeks to recognize changes.

Week 2. The Body

Now that you know what's normal, you can start to see what changes. This week you work your way down from head to toe and back up again: one day for each zone, then on the last day you put it all together. Keep your Day 7 profiles close at hand, because a signal is worth something only if it's different from the usual.

Day 8. Just the Feet

For a whole day, whenever people are standing and talking, look at where their feet point. Note at least two moments when someone's feet turn toward the exit or toward another person, and what had just

happened. You'll notice that feet often announce the end of a conversation.

Day 9. Under the Table

In a meeting or at dinner, watch what happens under the table: who crosses their legs and toward whom, who locks their ankles around the chair legs, who swings a foot. Link each movement to a sentence or a topic. Remember: the change counts, not the position.

Day 10. Forward and Back

In a chat between coworkers or at a café table, watch people's torsos. Who leans forward, toward whom, and when. Who instead leans back against the chair and creates distance, and after which sentence. The torso tells you right away where we want to be and what we're pulling back from.

Day 11. Barriers

Today, look for barriers: bags held tight on laps, mugs held in front of the chest, cushions on the couch, crossed arms, buttoned jackets. For each one, first ask yourself whether there's a mundane explanation (cold, comfort, habit). Write down only the ones that appeared suddenly.

Day 12. Disappearing Hands

Watch the hands of whoever is talking. When they gesture, when they stop, when they go into pockets or under the table. The moment the gestures disappear is often more interesting than the gestures themselves. Note when it happens and what was being discussed.

Day 13. Pacifying Behaviors

Watch ten minutes of a TV debate and count the pacifying behaviors: a hand to the neck, rubbing the back of the neck, hands rubbing together, fingers touching the lips. For each one, note the question or

the attack that came right before it. TV is a convenient training ground: nobody notices you're watching.

Day 14. Your First Cluster

Today you go looking for the heart of the method. In any conversation, find a moment when at least three signals change together: for example, the torso pulling away, the arms closing, the answers getting shorter. Write down the sentence that set them off. One signal is a clue; three together are a story.

Week 3. Face and Voice

The face is the most controlled part of the body, because we all know people are looking at our face. The voice, on the other hand, slips out of control more easily. This week you train your eye to be quick with expressions and your ear to pick up the way people speak, and you start watching yourself too, not just others.

Day 15. TV on Mute

Watch ten minutes of an interview or a talk show with the sound off. Note the expressions you recognize: anger, contempt, surprise, sadness, happiness. Then watch the same minutes again with the sound on. How many had you read correctly? Where did you go wrong, and why?

Day 16. Real Smiles and Polite Smiles

Today, count the smiles you get and sort them into two columns: the ones that reach the eyes and the ones with the mouth only. Don't judge the second column: a polite smile is good manners, not fakeness. Notice instead which situations bring out one and which bring out the other.

Day 17. Lips and Nose

Today, look for two lightning-fast signals: lip compression, the lips pressed together until they disappear (holding back), and a nose that wrinkles for a split second (disgust or annoyance). Note which sentence they follow. They last a heartbeat: catching them live is the real test of your reflexes.

Day 18. The Eyes

In a conversation, watch the blinking and the glances that shift away. When someone looks away, note what they were doing: thinking, remembering, feeling embarrassed? Remember that an averted gaze isn't a sign of lying. Today you check that for yourself.

Day 19. Voice Only

Listen to a long voice message or a work phone call. Note tone, pace, pauses, nervous laughs, throat clearing. Try to guess the speaker's mood without seeing their face. Then, if you know the person well, ask them how they were feeling at that moment. Without the images, your ear hears twice as much.

Day 20. Your Voice

Record one of your own ordinary voice messages, the kind you send every day, and listen back. Does your voice go up at the end of your sentences, in uptalk? Do you plug the silences with filled pauses like "um" and "like"? Do you talk faster when the topic makes you uncomfortable? Note just one thing to keep an eye on.

Day 21. Face and Voice Together

In a conversation, look for a moment when face and voice aren't saying the same thing: a smile with a tense voice, a flat "That's totally fine." Don't conclude anything. Ask an open-ended question ("How do you really see it?") and listen to the answer.

Week 4. Real Situations

The last week runs nine days, because it takes the method where it really matters: new encounters, meetings, stores, negotiations, moments when someone tries to push you. Not every exercise will land on the right day: if you don't have a meeting today, switch the order. What counts is doing them all, not doing them in sequence.

Day 22. Meeting Someone New

If you meet someone you don't know today (a client, another parent at school, a repair technician), spend the first two minutes on small talk alone. Take the baseline: voice, gestures, gaze. Then, when you get to the reason for the meeting, note what changes.

Day 23. Mapping the Glances

In a meeting or a group of friends, note whom people's eyes turn to after a joke, a hard question, or a decision that needs to be made. Compare that with who, on paper, should matter most. Who really makes the decisions?

Day 24. The Store

Walk into a store where you don't need to buy anything and let a salesperson approach you. Watch how they read you and how they use their body: how close they get, whether they mirror you, whether they touch you, whether they put something in your hands, whether they create a sense of urgency. Leave calmly whenever you like. It's practice in recognizing the scripts.

Day 25. The Video Call

On your next video call, note what remains (voice, face, sudden changes) and what disappears (feet, distance, real eye contact). At least once, ask out loud what you would read in the body face to face: "I get the feeling something isn't sitting right with you. Am I wrong?"

Day 26. The Moment of Yes

In a small negotiation (a quote from the plumber, a purchase, choosing the family vacation), look for the instant when the other person has made up their mind, even if they haven't said so yet: the shoulders drop, the torso moves closer, the catalog gets closed or picked up, and the questions shift from "if" to "how." Note that change.

Day 27. A Question Instead of an Accusation

If something in a conversation doesn't add up today, don't accuse and don't jump to conclusions. Ask an open-ended question and ask for an unexpected detail. Watch the body while the other person answers, keeping in mind that the fear of not being believed looks a lot like guilt. Write down what you saw, without a verdict.

Day 28. Your Entrance

Today, work on the way you walk into a room: a slow breath before the door, a calm stride, a brief pause just inside, hands out of your pockets, and you're the first to say hello. Note how others react. When you learn to read other people's bodies, you also learn to steer your own.

Day 29. A Defensive Move

When someone puts pressure on you (a call center rep, a coworker who wants an answer right now, a pushy salesperson), use one of the four moves from Chapter 14: put the distance back, break the rhythm, buy time ("Let me think about it and get back to you tomorrow"), or end it and leave. At the end of the day, write down the exact words you used and how the other person's body reacted.

Day 30. Reread Your Notebook

Reread your notebook from Day 1. Write down three things you notice today that slipped past you a month ago, and one snap judgment you

avoided. Then pick the week that helped you most and do it again next month. The eye, like any muscle, stays in shape only if you use it.

After Day 30

The risk, once a program is over, is filing it away. To hold on to what you've trained, three light habits are enough. One written observation a day, even a single line, about anyone at all. A reread of the quick reference in Appendix A whenever you're getting ready for an important encounter: a job interview, a negotiation, a difficult dinner. And one standing question to ask yourself in the evening, when you look back on the day: "Did I judge anyone too quickly today?" If the answer is yes, write down what you could have observed before you did.

At the end of these thirty days you won't have superpowers, and you don't need them. You'll have something more useful: the habit of looking carefully, describing before you judge, and asking one more question. That's everything this book set out to teach you.

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